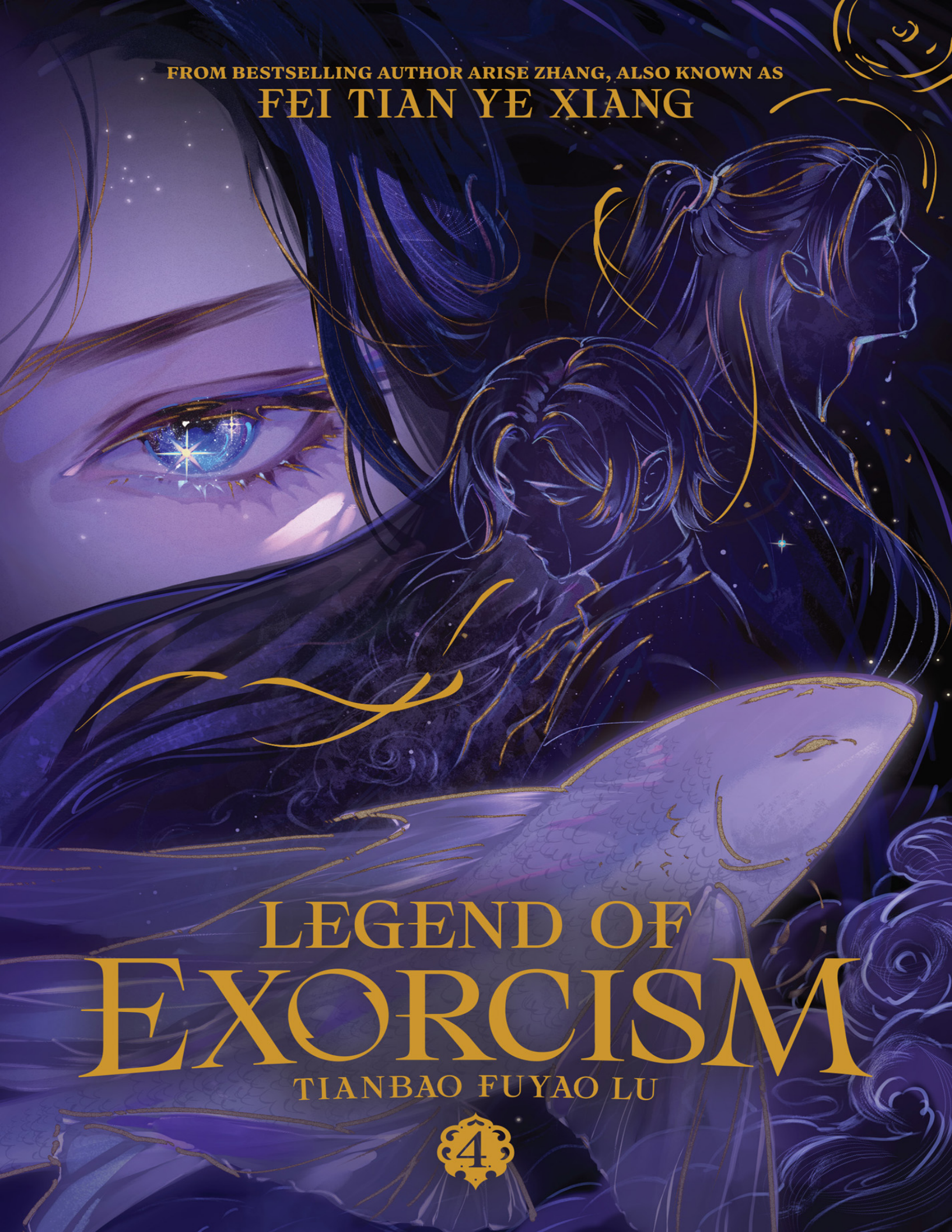
FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
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LEGEND OF
EXORCISM
TIANBAO FUYAO LU
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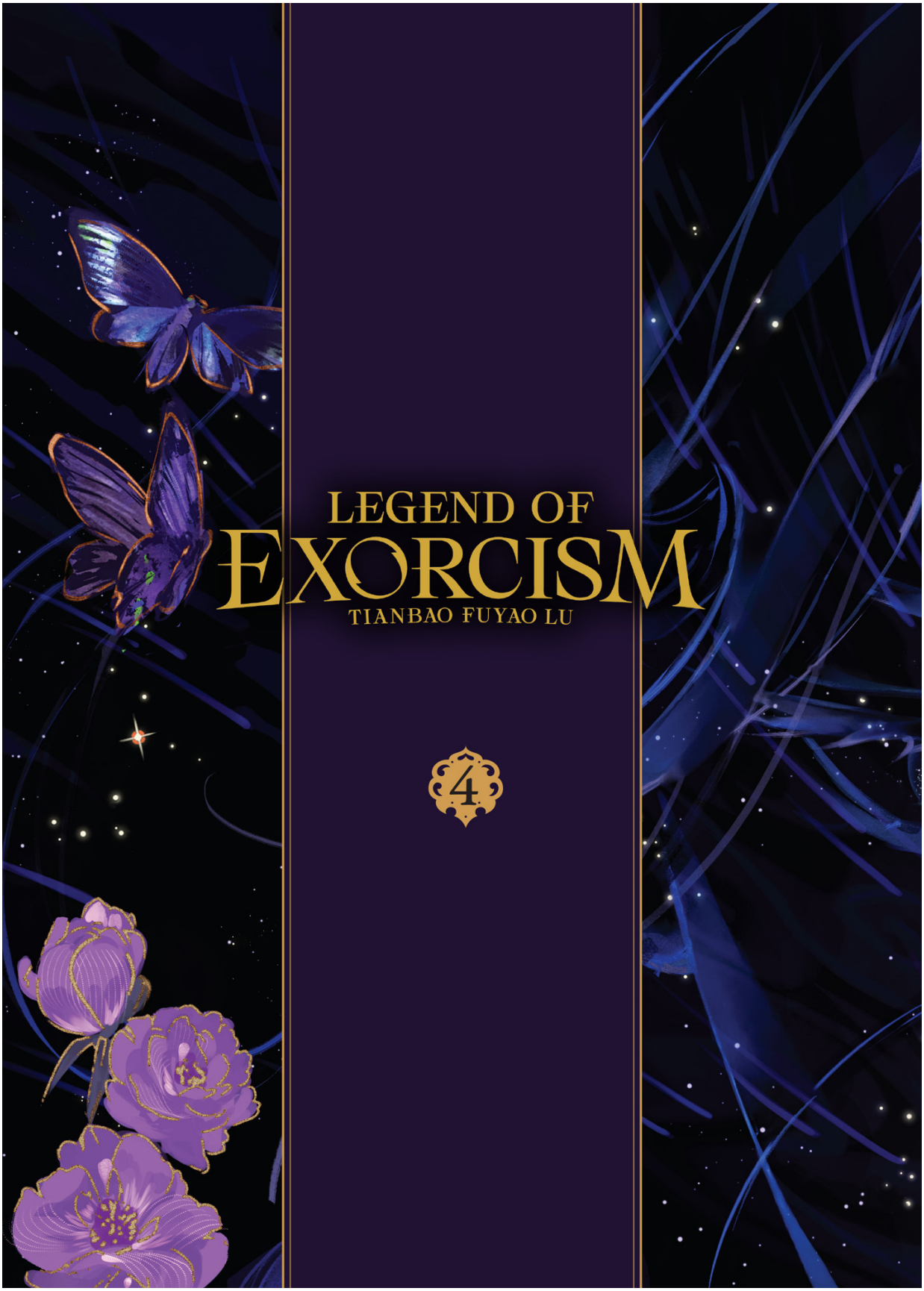
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LEGEND OF EXORCISM

TIANBAO FUYAO LU

天宝伏妖录

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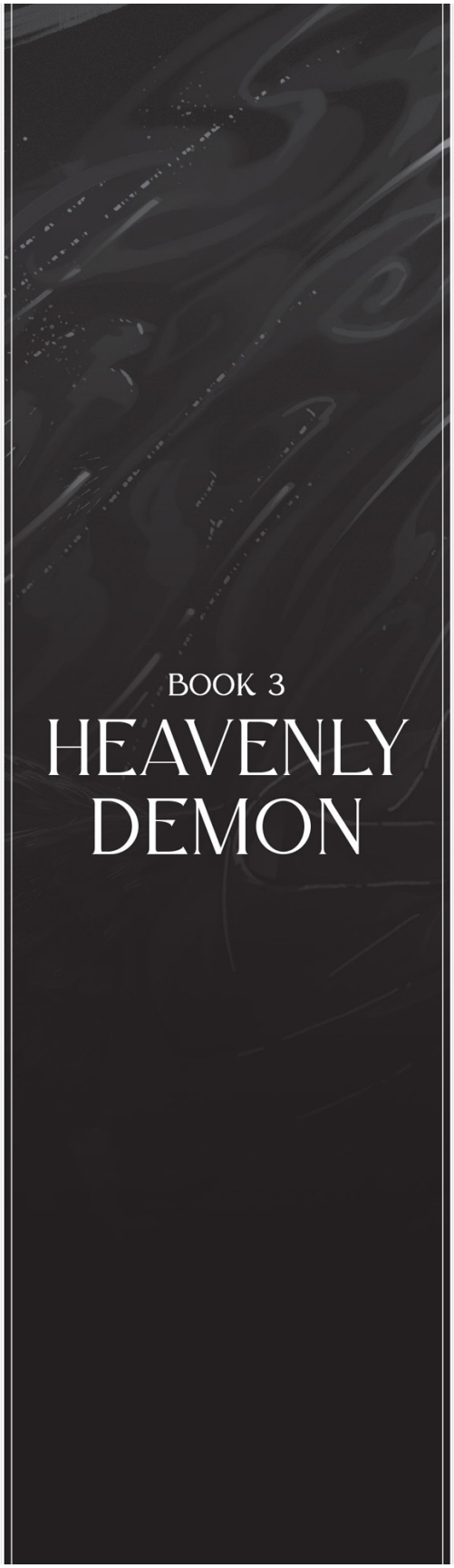
BOOK 3
HEAVENLY
DEMON

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Chapter 80:
False Accusations

IT WAS THE THIRD month, late spring in Chang'an, and the capital was shrouded in a mist that spread through the city like a thin layer of gauze.

A fine drizzle began to fall in the afternoon, washing the willows of the capital clean and revealing the vibrant green of their leaves. Rainwater stained the blooms, scattering their petals across the ground. It dripped from the eaves in a series of musical plinks as mist rolled into Xingqing Palace.

Noble Consort Yang reclined on a plush couch, staring absently into space. Beside her sat a rain-soaked Yang Guozhong, busy wiping down a gilt hourglass with a silk handkerchief. The hourglass was carved with a five-clawed dragon, startlingly lifelike, which clutched a pair of sealed compartments fashioned from colored glass. Each compartment was filled with what appeared to be gray powder, which, upon closer inspection, was in fact a mixture of fine black and white sand.

"Deng Tong of the Han dynasty was once the richest man in the world," Yang Yuhuan murmured. "Who could have imagined he would starve to death on the streets? Meanwhile, the statesman Shang Yang climbed to the heights of fame and glory, yet even he could not escape his fate; he was dismembered by five horses…"

"Enough." Yang Guozhong lowered his handkerchief and looked up at Yang Yuhuan with a frown. "What is the point in dwelling on this?"

"I'm worried," Yang Yuhuan said tearfully. "Gege, don't you know what they're saying about us out there? They're saying everyone in the Yang

family is a monster like my sister!”

Yang Guozhong’s eyes flashed with anger as Yang Yuhuan fretfully continued, “How did things turn out like this? How…”

“That Li Jinglong is a liar! He distorts the truth and says black is white, and white is black!” Yang Guozhong snapped. “Our greatest problem is that you cannot let this go!”

“How can I let it go?” Yang Yuhuan asked, distraught. “Ever since that night, I dream of Dajie, her face covered in blood while she urges me to avenge her. I thought this was over, that it would be best to forget—but now His Majesty tells me a heavenly demon will descend upon Great Tang…”

“A heavenly demon.” Yang Guozhong went back to wiping his golden hourglass, a sneer twisting his lips.

Watching him shake out his silk handkerchief, Yang Yuhuan sighed softly. “Gege, even great towers carved from jade and gold will one day fall. The taller the tree, the more exposed it is to the wind—we must prepare ourselves for this.”

“This talk of supernatural beings is nothing more than a fairy tale to deceive fools,” Yang Guozhong declared. “No doubt Li Jinglong orchestrated this entire affair so he could rise to the surface after being held down so long.”

Yang Yuhuan looked up sharply. “What do you mean?” she asked, a wrinkle in her brow.

“How long has it been since Great Tang had an imperial preceptor to advise its ruler on spiritual matters?” Yang Guozhong asked casually. “Li Heng wishes to succeed the throne; he is most certainly running his own

calculations. This talk of the heavenly demon, great misfortune, an imminent calamity—aside from targeting us, what purpose could it possibly serve?”

Yang Yuhuan’s beautiful face paled. Yang Guozhong gave the hourglass one last swipe, then produced a box carved from ebony and set the device carefully inside. “It’s high time your godson returned to the city. I’ll find an opportunity to have Li Jinglong ousted.”

Yang Yuhuan rose anxiously to her feet. After a moment of thought, Yang Guozhong cast his gaze outside toward the falling rain. “Geshu Han sent a secret dispatch. Several months ago when they were in Liang Prefecture, they caught one of those monsters. They left in a hurry and didn’t take it with them. Later, when Geshu Han interrogated the creature, he learned there’s a yaoguai among Li Jinglong’s company. Can you guess who it is?” Yang Yuhuan gave no reply, so he answered, “That young man—Kong Hongjun.”

“What?!” she exclaimed in shock. “That’s not possible! Doctor Kong, the man who treated my illness years ago—that’s his son!”

Yang Guozhong tucked the ebony box into his lapels. “Whether you believe it or not, these yao will inevitably show their true colors. Li Jinglong is a wicked man with a mind teeming with unfathomable schemes. But perhaps he hasn’t considered that we are living in an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity, with foreign nations coming from all corners of the world to kneel and pay tribute—since when has there been such a thing as demons?”

Yang Yuhuan drew in a slow breath.

“It was only after he became chief of the Department of Exorcism that these strange incidents began cropping up one after another—now his claims

are growing absurd. A ‘heavenly demon.’” Yang Guozhong scoffed. “It’s nothing more than a charade he conceived with Li Heng, a ghost story used to frighten children. It might be enough to fool that muddle-headed, decrepit old __”

“Mind your tongue!” Yang Yuhuan’s tone was sharp, her face pale with anger.

Yang Guozhong sneered. “It’s enough to fool *him*, but it won’t fool me. See here, if it comes to light that the Department of Exorcism is in fact the cause of all of these supernatural catastrophes, what do you suppose will happen to its members? Don’t tell me you really believe your older sister was a monster?”

“I…” Yang Yuhuan began uneasily.

Stepping forward, Yang Guozhong lowered his voice. “The Department of Exorcism is filled with jianghu magicians who use their illusion techniques to deceive people. Who could have imagined His Majesty would be taken in by conjuring tricks?”

A chill crawled up Yang Yuhuan’s spine.

“I’ll leave His Majesty to you. The Department of Exorcism cannot be allowed to persist. If left alone, things will only continue to escalate; there will be no end to it.”

Yang Yuhuan stared dazedly at Yang Guozhong. He did not belabor his point, but merely held her gaze briefly, then departed with a nod. Yang Yuhuan was left alone, watching the patter of the rain with a hollow look in her eyes.

At the Department of Exorcism, Mergen and Ashina Adarvan had just left to pursue fresh cases. A-Tai turned to Hongjun and Lu Xu. “Shall we go have ourselves a drink in the West Market?”

Hongjun and Lu Xu both declined, and so A-Tai set out to see Turandokht by himself. Li Jinglong had been out most of the day and had yet to return. Hongjun and Lu Xu settled down with two cups of tea to watch the rain dripping from the eaves.

“Where on earth did he go?” Hongjun murmured to himself.

“Two yaoguai appeared in Huaqing Palace last night. He left for Mount Li first thing this morning to investigate,” Lu Xu answered.

Hongjun had been nervous after last night’s events, worried everyone would ask him things like, *How did you end up falling for the chief?* and, *Where did you two go last night?* and, *Does this mean that you guys are together now?* To his surprise, however, everyone seemed wholly unfazed. Aside from a bit of good-natured teasing, they all acted as if his relationship with Li Jinglong was simply a matter of course.

“Mergen…” Hongjun began.

“I won’t bring up Li Jinglong,” Lu Xu said blandly, “so don’t you bring up Mergen either.”

Hongjun nodded—and thus an unspoken accord was established. Lu Xu was about to say something else when a voice sounded from outside.

“Chief Li! Is Chief Li here?”

Hongjun went to let the visitor in—one of the crown prince’s messengers, who had come to deliver an imperial edict.

“The chief’s out investigating a case,” Hongjun explained.

“Then you can accept it on his behalf,” the messenger said. “This is an edict from His Majesty and the Eastern Palace conferring upon Chief Li the title of Marquis of Yardang.”

Although hundreds of thousands of fallen corpse ghosts slumbered in their graves beneath its yellow sands, Yardang had always been a barren wasteland. No one had ever been appointed marquis of such a place. “I’ve also brought Chief Li’s jurisdictional order and official seal of nobility. The decree containing the conferral of his noble title has been sent to Hexi. Yardang has no inhabitants, so it’s enough to notify Jia Zhou of Yumen Pass.”

“What does that mean?” Lu Xu asked.

“Not a clue,” Hongjun said.

They had been left behind to look after their headquarters, but neither of them was well-versed in the ways of mortals. Hongjun and Lu Xu exchanged a glance, then accepted the edict without any of the customary expressions of gratitude.

“Are there no adults here?” the messenger asked in exasperation.

“I’m an adult,” Hongjun said indignantly. “I’m already seventeen! How am I not an adult?!”

“I’m eighteen,” Lu Xu added. “He’s my older brother.”

The messenger stared. It was said the Department of Exorcism was filled with eccentrics, and today, he had seen it with his own eyes. But he had no time at the moment to delve into why a seventeen-year-old was the elder brother of an eighteen-year-old; he promptly turned to the next order of business. Pulling out an envelope, he said, “This is a letter from Hexi. To accept it, you’ll need to provide your seal.”

Having no seal, Hongjun signed with his fingerprint. As the messenger opened his umbrella and set off back down the road to report to his superior, Lu Xu peered at the letter and spotted Hongjun's name. "For you?"

Hongjun opened the envelope. "It's from my uncle!"

The letter recounted everything that had occurred following Hongjun's departure from Yumen Pass. Hongjun had left in a hurry, without explaining anything in full. Looking at his uncle's letter now, it seemed there had been some previous exchange—Li Jinglong must have penned a message apologizing on his behalf. Jia Zhou wrote that he had no idea when they would be able to meet again, but he exhorted Hongjun to visit him frequently at Yumen Pass during the warmer seasons, when he had the time.

"Jiujiu is the only family I have," Hongjun told Lu Xu.

Lu Xu nodded. "We're different from ordinary mortals."

A thought struck Hongjun then: He was half yao, which meant…he would likely live for a long time, wouldn't he? But Li Jinglong, Lu Xu, and the others were all human. What was he going to do?

Oblivious to the turn Hongjun's thoughts had taken, Lu Xu drew another slip of paper from the envelope. "What about this one?"

"This is from…the ghost king!" Hongjun scanned the silk paper covered in neat seal script but couldn't recognize more than a handful of characters. He'd just turned to look for a reference text when another voice sounded from outside.

"Chief Li! Chief!"

Thinking the messenger from the Eastern Palace had returned, Hongjun opened the door to find that it was instead Huang Yong, the Deputy Chief

Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, accompanied by a secretary.

"Where's the chief?" Huang Yong asked anxiously.

Hongjun explained the situation once again while Lu Xu peeked out from behind him. Knowing this was Li Jinglong's immediate superior, Hongjun politely invited Huang Yong in for tea. Huang Yong left his secretary by the door and followed the two young men inside.

"Mergen's not here either? When will they be back?"

"No idea," Hongjun said. He and Lu Xu regarded Huang Yong expressionlessly.

"Kong Hongjun, are there no adults here?" Huang Yong asked, glancing around.

"Nope," Hongjun and Lu Xu chorused.

"We're just a pair of stupid little kids," Lu Xu added.

"That's right," Hongjun agreed. "You see, our heads were caught in a door jamb when we were little, so we're a bit slow on the uptake. We can't even investigate cases, much less exorcise yao. All we can do is loaf around here and wait for death."

"You mustn't tell us anything, no matter what happens," Lu Xu said.

"Not that we're curious why you've come or anything," Hongjun chimed in. "Why not just stay put and wait until the chief comes back."

Stung by their sarcasm, Huang Yong hastily amended, "That's not what I meant. If the two of you would please come with me… Oh? What's this? 'The Marquis of Yardang?' Goodness, I'll have to start calling him 'my lord'…but why Yardang, of all places?"

Hongjun and Lu Xu merely watched, heads cocked to the side, as Huang Yong took a moment to digest the imperial edict that conferred this new noble title upon Li Jinglong.

“Then if you don’t mind, I’ll explain the situation to the two of you,” Huang Yong said. The man was drenched in sweat from scurrying to and fro. “It’s a rather strange case, so please bear with me.”

Huang Yong knew Hongjun by sight—the young man often visited the Court of Judicial Review with Li Jinglong—but he had always taken the boy for Li Jinglong’s attendant. But the situation was dire, so after reordering his thoughts, Huang Yong began, “I’ll get straight to the point: A terrible incident occurred at one of the imperial mausoleums last night…”

THIRTEENTH YEAR OF TIANBAO,

SEVENTEENTH DAY OF THE THIRD MONTH.

Incident: Haunting at the Zhao Mausoleum.

Degree of Difficulty: Human.

Location: Zhao Mausoleum of Emperor Taizong on Mount Jiuzong.

Person(s) Involved: Unknown.

Case Details: On the thirteenth night of the third month, a malevolent spirit appeared at the Zhao Mausoleum of Emperor Taizong on Mount Jiuzong and attacked the night guards from Guojia Village, killing four and driving one to madness. The individual who went mad escaped and fled deep into the mausoleum. An aide of the Court of Judicial Review, one Cheng Xiao, along with the bailiff of the local yamen, entered the Zhao Mausoleum to investigate but found no conclusive cause.

Remuneration: None at this time.

Note: Do not disturb His Majesty or any other officials with this matter lest you lose your head!

"A haunting? Why didn't you say so?" Hongjun asked.

Huang Yong smiled bitterly. "We transferred the case, but the Department of Exorcism hasn't proceeded with the investigation. It's a matter of great importance, and it involves Emperor Taizong's mausoleum. Step wrongly here, and we could all end up on the execution block."

Lu Xu and Hongjun exchanged a look.

"Let's wait for the chief to come back," Hongjun said decisively. This was the imperial family's ancestral tomb; he didn't dare just saunter in.

"You can't!" Huang Yong blanched. "Kong Hongjun, the Department of Exorcism must make the trip out there today. This case cannot be delayed any further! If we tarry any longer, the mausoleum guard will storm the Court of Judicial Review and raise a great fuss. The soldiers are too scared to return to duty, and the registrar, Lian Hao, is close with the Yang family—if His Majesty finds out and flies into a rage, we'll—we'll… Didn't you guys just defeat an army of corpse ghosts or something?"

Hongjun and Lu Xu shared another glance.

"This is an extremely serious situation!" Huang Yong continued. "Extremely, extremely serious!" He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "This case concerns the fate of the nation. If someone with ulterior motives finds out the mausoleum of one of the dynasty's founding emperors is being

haunted and uses this fact to further their own agenda, or if Chancellor Yang suspects someone is deliberately trying to hoodwink the public…"

Hongjun and Lu Xu looked at each other in confusion as Huang Yong fretted. "If someone spreads a rumor saying it's the immortal spirit of Emperor Taizong come to admonish His Majesty… Ay, you two don't understand!"

Realization dawned on Hongjun. He turned to Lu Xu and explained, "Justice Huang is saying the spirit of the emperor's ancestor has come back to berate him for neglecting political affairs."

"I didn't say that!" Huang Yong interjected. "I said that I *fear* people with *ulterior motives* might spread rumors! Aiyo, my dear young masters… When did you say your leader was coming back?"

Seeing that Huang Yong was on the verge of tears, Hongjun said, "Don't panic. We'll go take a look."

Lu Xu readily agreed. The rain had stopped, but none of the others had returned. Huang Yong issued them a plethora of warnings and reminders before taking his leave. Hongjun penned a note for the others, stuffed the carp yao—lethargic with the warm spring weather—into his bag, and headed out with Lu Xu in tow.

It was just past noon. Lu Xu would have ambled right out of the city had Hongjun not suggested they find A-Tai first. The pair thus made their way toward Turandokht's tavern.

The tavern was located in the heart of the city, across the street from that restaurant Hongjun favored, Dragon's Gate. The interior was spacious and lavishly decorated with hanging silk curtains, yet there were no

customers inside this afternoon—only A-Tai, swatting at flies with a flyswatter.

“How much did all of this cost?” Lu Xu wondered, gazing up at the two-story building as they stood on the street outside. “Can they even make it all back?”

Like Lu Xu, Hongjun had only the roughest idea of how money worked. Spotting the pair, Turandokht called out, “I’m in an excellent mood today—all drinks are on the house!”

A-Tai waved the flyswatter at Hongjun and Lu Xu in greeting. Hongjun quickly turned down her offer, then filled A-Tai in on the case.

“Shall we go together?” he said, hurrying out to meet them.

Hongjun glanced at Turandokht, afraid she would be angry. “Why don’t you stay here and keep Saozi company.”

Turandokht stepped out as well. “He can go with you.”

“We’ll be back in no time,” Lu Xu said. “A few hours at most. It’ll be slower if you come along.”

A-Tai reluctantly gave in, but warned them to be careful. As soon as they were out of the city, Lu Xu found a secluded spot. He transformed into the white deer and encouraged Hongjun to clamber onto his back.

“Look, your antlers!” Hongjun exclaimed.

The stumps where Hongjun had cut them had healed over, and the branching antlers had grown out slightly, now resembling a dragon’s short horns.

“They’ll grow back eventually,” the white deer said. “Hold on tight.”

The white deer took off at a trot, bounding faster and faster, as if soaring through the clouds. He veered off the official road and dashed into the wilderness, his hooves treading on wind, whipping past verdant fields of wheat with Hongjun on his back as he flew toward the mountains.

Ordinarily, it took half a day on horseback to reach Mount Jiuzong from Chang'an by the circuitous official roads. The white deer was fast as lightning, and their shortcut through the fields brought them to the Zhao Mausoleum after only two hours, just as the sun began to tilt toward the west. Traveling at such high speeds took its toll, however: When Lu Xu shifted back into human form, he collapsed on the steps outside the mausoleum, gasping for breath.

"You were practically flying," Hongjun said. "There's no need to rush like that."

"I'm fine with short distances," Lu Xu panted, "but I can't do long journeys like this. The big wolf has great stamina, though. Who knows where he's gotten off to."

Built into the west side of Mount Jiuzong, the Zhao Mausoleum was a palatial construction that housed a number of ministers' tombs in its side chambers. The mountain was a lonely spot at the best of times, and now the usual guards patrolling the outside had all withdrawn to Guojia Village at the mountain's foot in the wake of the attack. The place seemed unnervingly desolate.

A cold wind drifted past, rustling the mountainside vegetation. Hongjun felt an inexplicable wave of cold yin energy. The fact that this grave belonged to an emperor did not make the atmosphere any less unsettling.

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" Hongjun asked.

“Not really,” Lu Xu said—but he couldn’t help a small shiver of fear.

They stood shoulder to shoulder beneath the decorated archway that marked the entrance. If Hongjun had come alone, he might have been scared enough to wake up the carp yao in his bag for company, but with Lu Xu here, he felt much bolder.

It had been a while since Hongjun last fought using his spiritual devices; he felt a bit out of practice. Nevertheless, he unleashed his pentacolor sacred light and slipped his throwing knives between his fingers.

“You don’t have a spiritual device,” Hongjun observed. He recalled that Lu Xu had only ever used a shovel in combat.

“The big wolf said he would get me one.”

“Stick close to me, then.” Hongjun stepped over the threshold, sacred light in his left hand and his throwing knives in his right.

“All right, I’ll stay behind you,” Lu Xu agreed.

This was Hongjun’s first time leading an investigation, and to complicate matters, his only backup was Lu Xu, a total greenhorn. If Li Jinglong were in charge, he would have followed protocol and gathered more information before heading out to inspect the scene. By comparison, Hongjun had barely grasped the gist of the situation before rushing over unprepared. And while he could tell something was off here, he couldn’t say what it was, or why.

“You think it’s a ghost?” Lu Xu asked.

“What do you think?” Hongjun asked, distracted, as the two of them took the meandering path around the outside of the mausoleum.

“It could be a yao,” Lu Xu offered.

Hongjun nodded. Lu Xu had once been an army scout; despite having only one immortal soul and one mortal form, he had witnessed plenty of ongoing investigations while delivering dispatches.

“Where were they attacked?” Hongjun mumbled to himself.

They arrived at another flight of steps, this time leading into the mausoleum itself. Though they strained their ears, the only sound was the wind whipping past. A row of barracks constructed from brick and tile—presumably meant to house the guards—stood just outside. Both caught a whiff of a pungent odor.

“Blood,” Lu Xu said.

Hongjun recognized the smell too. He kicked open the door and peered inside. Purple-black blood covered every surface. The splatter trailed its way out the back door, as if a body had been dragged away.

“Here,” Hongjun said. “Follow the blood.”

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Chapter 81:
A Strange Incident at the Zhao Mausoleum

THE TRAIL OF BLOOD twisted and turned, slanting across the grassy lawn and dripping over the barracks' rooftops. Putting his back to the wall, Hongjun beckoned Lu Xu over and laced his fingers together. He boosted Lu Xu onto the roof before jumping up behind him.

"This doesn't look like the work of a ghost," Lu Xu murmured. "Have you ever heard of one that eats people?"

"I've barely heard anything about ghosts at all. I've no idea what they would look like."

Despite their name, corpse ghosts weren't properly ghosts. In fact, they were jiangshi, a type of hopping corpse, and could just barely be considered yao. Growing up, Hongjun had never heard Chong Ming mention ghosts; what little he knew came from the books of folk legends Qing Xiong used to bring him. In all his years, Lu Xu had never seen a ghost either—much less a man-eating one.

"Maybe Emperor Taizong got hungry and decided to come out for a late-night snack?" Hongjun and Lu Xu gazed down at the entrance of the Zhao Mausoleum.

"Doubt it," Lu Xu said. "Why would he stay in a dusty old tomb when he can go be reincarnated? For some reason, I don't feel like there's anything undead here."

As he spoke, he pressed a hand to his temple and swept his gaze intently over their surroundings. Hongjun looked up just as Lu Xu began to

emit a strange energy. Perhaps because they had been broken and thus greatly weakened, Lu Xu's antlers manifested only as two glowing shapes, which cast faint streams of light like a set of tethers linking the heavenly meridians above to the earthly meridians beneath his feet.

"Whoa, what kind of spiritual technique is this?!" Hongjun exclaimed in awe.

Lu Xu closed his eyes, his brow deeply furrowed and his body glowing with divine white light. As Hongjun gazed at his handsome profile, he felt Lu Xu had transformed into a deity who presided over all the world's living things.

"The power of dreams connects the heavenly and earthly meridians to the wheel of reincarnation." After a pause, Lu Xu quietly continued, "If a human does not wish to be reincarnated after death, their soul will remain in this world. A presence like this may occasionally be glimpsed by the living in their dreams. But there are no lingering ghosts here…only faint traces of the souls of the men killed a few days ago. Look—"

Lu Xu set a hand against the nape of Hongjun's neck. The scene before Hongjun's eyes instantly changed: The sky, the earth, the mountains, and the rivers were draped in a silk-like curtain of pulsating light. The heavenly and earthly meridians twisted across that luminous curtain, gleaming with all the colors of the rainbow. Just outside the imperial mausoleum, several wisps of light were rising into the sky like white smoke—the souls of the guards who had died.

Lu Xu retracted his hand, and the world returned to normal.

"Can you ask those souls what happened?" Hongjun suggested.

Lu Xu shook his head. “I can’t communicate with spirits. But you saw for yourself—there are no powerful ghosts inside.”

With this, they were near certain the imperial mausoleum wasn’t haunted. Rather, the culprit was most likely a yao—specifically, a yao that could fly, given the drops of blood on the rooftops.

They followed the trail to the entrance of the mausoleum. The massive stone door was doused liberally in blood, yet it remained shut tight and showed no evidence of having been opened recently. It seemed something had grabbed the corpse and slammed into the door before passing directly through the stone barrier.

Hongjun pushed hard against the door to no avail. Lu Xu stepped forward to help, and the two of them braced themselves against the stone surface, but it refused to budge.

Stepping back from the door, Hongjun merged his throwing knives into his long saber and tested its weight in his hand. “Should I chop it open?”

“I think we might have to lift this door to open it.” Lu Xu pointed. “Look, there’s a mechanism along the side.”

The door was a dragon-severing stone. Set at the entrance of imperial mausoleums, such stones were flanked by a pair of iron mechanisms as tall as a man. When the Son of Heaven visited to offer sacrifice to his ancestors, two teams of forty men were required to insert specially designed iron rods into the mechanisms and push down as one. Only then could they slowly lift the heavy stone slab to unseal the entrance.

Hongjun expanded his pentacolor sacred light, sending it down into the ground beneath the mausoleum. He pushed the sacred light upward, and the dragon-severing stone rose with a deafening rumble. In a flash, he cast the

light behind him, then retracted it, dragging a large rock toward the entrance, which he jammed beneath the dragon-severing stone.

The rocks outside the mausoleum were composed of a dense granite, and the chunk Hongjun had wedged beneath the door left just enough space for a single person to slip through. One by one, the exorcists dropped to the ground and slid into the darkness.

Hongjun snapped his fingers, and fire sparked in his hand, revealing their surroundings. They stood at the head of a passageway lined with hanging oil lamps, which seemed to stretch endlessly into the darkness. Flames leapt from Hongjun's fingertips, lighting the lamps and illuminating a spacious, well-ventilated chamber. The place would have been spotless, but for the bloodstains curling deeper into the passage. Lu Xu gestured to the dark trail, and Hongjun nodded, angling his body to keep Lu Xu behind him.

The rhythmic rasp of breathing sounded from the depths of the tomb, like a gust of wind drifting past—or like the hiss of a yaoguai in the darkness. On both sides of the corridor, the oil lamps flickered, then soundlessly guttered out.

Startled, Hongjun nearly flung one of his throwing knives before Lu Xu stopped him. "Don't panic… There wasn't much oil left in the lamps."

Hongjun summoned the pentacolor sacred light, allowing them to at least see each other's faces. "This place is way too creepy."

Lu Xu was nervous as well. "I don't like it either."

"Maybe we should head back?"

Lu Xu didn't respond. Hongjun stood in front, feeling as though there was something at the end of the passageway staring hungrily at them. He'd

taken only a few steps forward when Lu Xu reached out and grabbed his sleeve. Hongjun nearly squawked in alarm as he turned back to look at Lu Xu. Lu Xu's easy composure had disappeared; now, he looked genuinely frightened.

Together, they inched forward. Lu Xu spoke up again. "If something attacks us here, we won't be able to—"

"We'll just take a look to see what it is. Then we'll go back."

A deeply unsettling atmosphere permeated the imperial mausoleum. Hongjun had felt a chill at his back ever since entering, and the closer he drew to the end of the passage, the louder and clearer that raspy breathing became.

"There's a yaoguai hiding here," Hongjun whispered. "Maybe it's sleeping?"

"Put away your pentacolor sacred light," Lu Xu said softly, peeking out from behind Hongjun. Hongjun pressed his back against the wall of the passageway, prepared to defend against any yaoguai that might come charging out.

A voice rang out in the stillness: "Why is it so dark?!"

"Ahh!" Hongjun cried out in terror.

"Who's there?!" Lu Xu jumped in fright as well.

"Where am I?!" the carp yao yelped, his voice panicked. "What the hell is happening?!"

Hongjun had completely forgotten about the carp yao strapped to his back; needless to say, so had Lu Xu. After sleeping the entire way there, Zhao Zilong had finally woken up, and the three members of the Department of

Exorcism proceeded to scare themselves silly, their souls nearly fleeing their bodies in terror. Lu Xu tripped and grabbed onto Hongjun to steady himself, sending Hongjun tumbling down a flight of stairs.

“Lu Xu! Where are you?!”

“I’m here! I’m here!”

The two humans dashed several steps forward. “It’s just Zhao Zilong!” Hongjun explained hastily. “Zhao Zilong!”

“Where am I?!” the carp yao wailed. “Why have I gone blind?! Hongjun! Hongjun, where are you?!”

Lu Xu frantically shushed him. “Shut up!”

A long while later, after pacifying the carp yao and explaining he hadn’t gone blind, it was just that their surroundings were dark, Hongjun asked, “Do you want me to set you down?”

“No!” the carp yao said, instantly rejecting the offer.

“Where are we?” Lu Xu wondered.

The raspy breathing had gone quiet, but faint echoes swirled around them—they seemed to have stumbled into a large hall. Silence fell, yet they felt the hair rise on the back of their necks. High up in the hall, perhaps embedded in the ceiling, what seemed to be a pair of enormous green night pearls gleamed. They were too distant, and their glow too weak, to illuminate their surroundings.

“I think we need to leave,” Lu Xu whispered.

Hongjun sensed the danger as well. The yaoguai’s steady breathing had stopped—the creature had sensed intruders.

“I’m going to light the lamps,” Hongjun said. “The moment they catch, we retreat and leave this to the others.”

Flames burst from his palms and swept outward in all directions like shooting stars, seeking anything flammable and setting all sixteen braziers in the hall ablaze. Light flooded the hall—they found themselves in a sheltered area where coffins were kept before burial. Hongjun realized the flight of stairs had led them right to the mausoleum’s sacrificial altar. By the light of the crackling fire, they spied a jade coffin set on a thirty-foot-tall catafalque in the center of the hall, upon which coiled a great black serpent.

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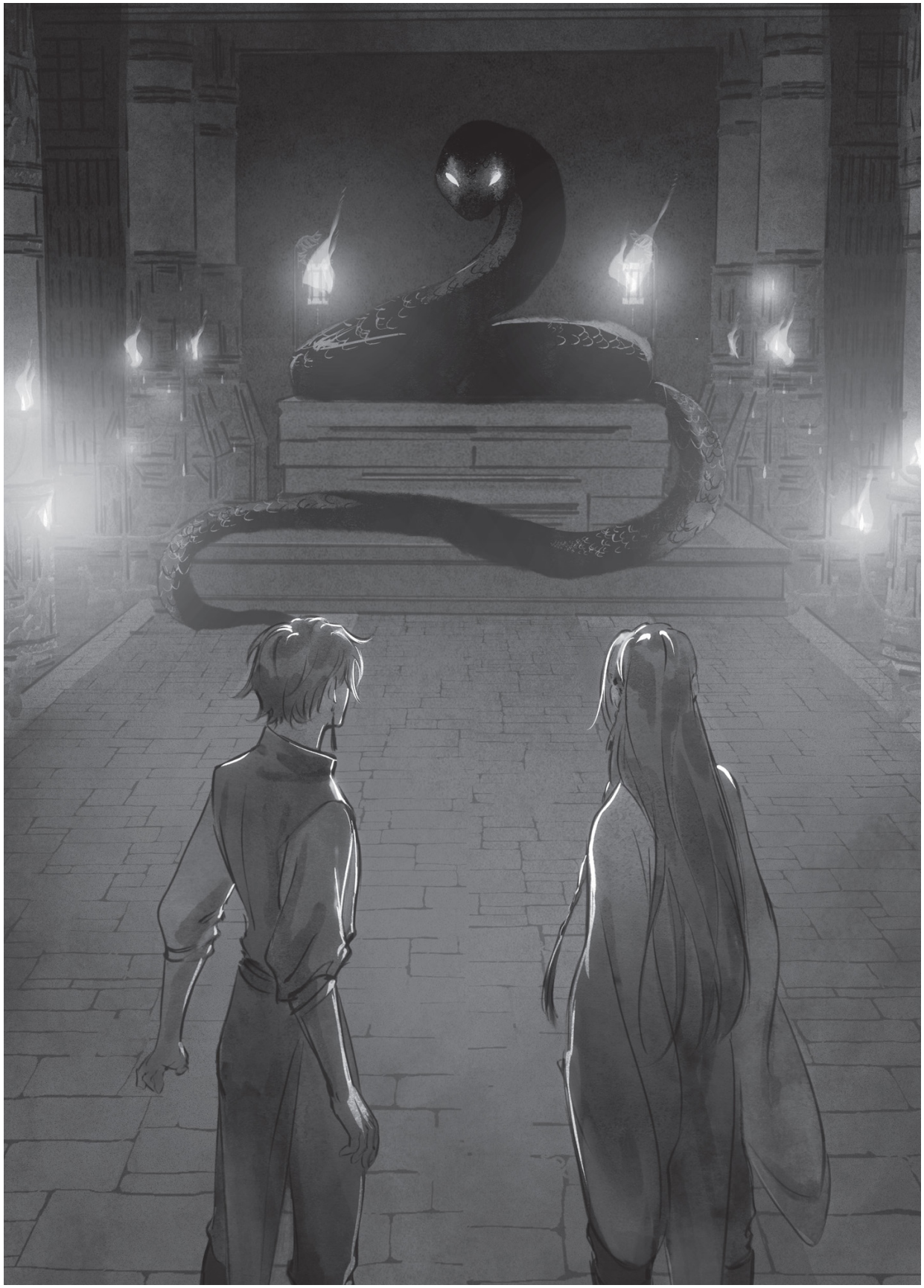

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The serpent's green eyes were the cartwheel-sized gemstones Hongjun had seen earlier.

"We meet again, Kong Hongjun—"

The serpent reared back, revealing the enormous mass of demonic energy spiraling around the horn protruding from its scaly head. It swung its gaze toward Hongjun and opened its bloody maw to reveal a mouth full of sharp teeth, forked tongue flickering.

Hongjun's eyes widened, reflecting the roiling demonic energy gathered at the tip of the serpent's horn. Darkness flooded in wave after wave through the hall, completely surrounding him and Lu Xu. He suddenly recalled the black jiao that had sprung from within the heart demon at the Mogao Caves. "Xie Yu?!"

"Run!" Lu Xu shouted.

"Too late," Xie Yu hissed, breaking into malevolent laughter. He opened his mouth to spray Hongjun with a jet of black mist.

"Hongjun!" Lu Xu shouted.

Hongjun instinctively summoned his pentacolor sacred light, but the barrier couldn't block the demonic energy; in an instant, he was engulfed by black flames. Lu Xu dashed forward to shove him out of the way, but Xie Yu was faster—with a ferocious slap of his enormous tail, he sent Lu Xu flying.

It was just as it'd been when he'd absorbed the nightmares at Dunhuang—pain, anger, and boundless sorrow surged within Hongjun. His parents lying dead before the golden-armored warrior, the agony of the engulfing fire as fresh blood spilled from his cracked and blackened skin…

Familiar or otherwise, life's myriad sufferings ignited the demon seed in his heart.

Xie Yu gave a hoarse roar as the black energy flowing from his horn transformed into a stream of obsidian flames linked to the demon seed in Hongjun's chest. Hongjun's pupils contracted.

"Tell me you like me, Hongjun."

A familiar voice echoed in his mind. The pain, the sorrow…all of his dark memories shattered. Enveloped in a white glow, Hongjun watched as Li Jinglong wrapped him in a warm embrace and pressed a soft yet searing kiss to his lips.

Light flashed in Hongjun's chest and deflected Xie Yu's black flames.

"Get lost!" Hongjun yelled furiously, unleashing his throwing knives, which hurtled across the hall like meteors.

Xie Yu slithered from his perch with a sibilant snarl and lunged for Hongjun. With a flicker of movement, Lu Xu appeared between them. "Are you all right?!" he demanded, grabbing Hongjun.

"Get out of here!" Hongjun shouted. "Don't worry about me!"

They retreated into the passageway. Xie Yu twisted his sinuous body and slithered up the wall. Glaring down at Hongjun from above, he hissed, "This is your destiny—as it has been and shall be time and again, for all eternity. Why don't you understand?!"

Demonic energy coiled around Hongjun and Lu Xu as they bounded up the stairs. Summoning his throwing knives, Hongjun merged the blades and was about to swing his saber when the carp yao cried, "Don't! The place'll collapse!"

Hongjun froze as he remembered they were underground. He lowered the saber and summoned his pentacolor sacred light just as Xie Yu dropped from the ceiling and slammed into him.

The sheer force of the impact sent Hongjun flying. Lu Xu vaulted up the wall and caught him in midair, scooping a hand under his knees and pulling him close to his chest.

“Out of the way!” a shout rang out. A dazzling arrow cut through the darkness like the blazing sun, its fletching trailing smoke.

“Jinglong!” Hongjun cried.

Li Jinglong had arrived. Grabbing Lu Xu in return, Hongjun kicked off the ceiling and somersaulted, narrowly avoiding Li Jinglong’s shot. A series of sharp whistles swept past their ears a second later—Mergen’s seven nailhead arrows.

Winging through the darkness, the condensed power of Li Jinglong’s heart lamp pierced cleanly through the center of the roiling demonic energy. A fierce roar erupted in the depths of the mausoleum. The moment Hongjun landed, Li Jinglong skidded to his side and gripped his elbow. “Let’s go!”

Mergen, too, grabbed Lu Xu’s wrist and began to pull him toward the exit. But Lu Xu was the faster by far; in a flash, he was running at the head of the pack. Caught off guard, Mergen stumbled as he was dragged along behind him. “Wait up!”

The four of them sprinted back toward the entrance, squeezing one at a time under the dragon-severing stone. Outside, the ground was wet—it had begun to rain again. Hongjun slipped and would have fallen had Li Jinglong not been there, holding him with a steady hand.

Li Jinglong whipped around, eyeing the gap beneath the dragon-severing stone with the Sword of Wisdom in hand, prepared to strike. Everyone waited with bated breath, but there was no sound from Xie Yu.

Hongjun began, “Just now, I—”

Li Jinglong shushed him. They waited a little longer, but sensed no movement inside the imperial mausoleum. Xie Yu didn’t chase them, nor did any demonic energy emerge from the gap beneath the dragon-severing stone.

“Should we go inside for another look?” Mergen asked.

Li Jinglong jabbed a finger at the ground, indicating that Hongjun and Lu Xu were to stay put. He mimed smacking Hongjun on the head, as if to say, *I’ll deal with you later.*

“Be careful,” Lu Xu said.

Hongjun and Lu Xu listened anxiously as Li Jinglong and Mergen slipped back in. The two returned in short order. Mergen traded a look with Li Jinglong, arrows still in hand.

“He’s gone?” Hongjun asked in surprise.

Li Jinglong spread his hands in a shrug, then frowned at Hongjun. “How could you rush out here like that?! I was worried sick!”

While Li Jinglong took Hongjun aside to lecture him, Mergen perched atop the mausoleum’s balustrades and looked at Lu Xu. “Hongjun’s always been impulsive, but what were you thinking, joining him?”

“We’re capable too!” Lu Xu snapped back. “We’re not just parasites. When it comes to running, I’m faster than you!”

A short distance away, Hongjun was quietly explaining what had happened to Li Jinglong. “You blocked the demonic energy?!” Li Jinglong

asked, astonished.

“Ah…mm,” Hongjun agreed haltingly. “I think so, but I don’t know __”

“Don’t go out alone like that ever again!”

“I was with Lu Xu and Zhao Zilong!” Hongjun protested. “I didn’t go out alone.”

“That’s right,” the carp yao piped up from behind Hongjun. “What are you, his keeper?”

Li Jinglong wanted to say it didn’t matter who he was with—but that would mean he didn’t trust anyone in the Department of Exorcism with Hongjun’s safety. For all his lecturing, at the end of the day, he could only fault himself for not protecting Hongjun properly. He left off reprimanding him and patted him on the head, momentarily lost in thought. As Hongjun looked back at him in confusion, Li Jinglong couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll settle accounts with you tonight, after we get back,” Li Jinglong said easily.

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“Uhh… In the future, you can’t go running off like this,” Mergen lectured Lu Xu. “Even if you *can* run very fast…”

Lu Xu stared blankly at Mergen. The two of them glanced over at Li Jinglong, who had pulled Hongjun into a kiss. Both went mute—Mergen didn’t dare follow in Li Jinglong’s example, lest Lu Xu send him flying back into the Zhao Mausoleum with a roundhouse kick.

Noting the change in his tone, Hongjun realized Li Jinglong was no longer angry. He wondered aloud, “But how did Xie Yu disappear?”

“I think this was a trap,” Mergen called over.

“Go check one last time,” Li Jinglong said. “We can discuss when we return to headquarters.”

Mergen and Lu Xu slid back inside and descended to that deep hall within the Zhao Mausoleum. The braziers were still lit, but the demonic energy had evaporated without a trace.

“Could he be hiding in one of the coffins?” Mergen eyed the nearest one.

“There’s no way. How could such a large snake fit inside a human coffin?”

They searched for a secret mechanism but found nothing; it was as if the demonic energy had never been. Baffled, they crawled back out and informed Li Jinglong that there was still nothing inside the underground vault.

“What the hell? How did it just up and disappear?” the carp yao asked.

Li Jinglong hadn’t slept a wink the night before due to overexcitement, and then he’d rushed around working all day. He was ready to fall asleep on

his feet. After asking Hongjun to remove the slab of granite from beneath the dragon-severing stone, he told everyone to head back. Mergen shifted into wolf form and carried the other three away from Mount Jiuzong and back to Chang’an.

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Chapter 82:
Lanling Amber

THAT EVENING, as the first lanterns of the night were lit, Chang'an's wards bustled with activity. With all the members of the Department of Exorcism out investigating, there had been no one at headquarters to cook, so Li Jinglong led them to Lanling Amber—the tavern owned by Turandokht—with hopes of cadging a meal before turning in.

Seeing that more of A-Tai's colleagues had come to visit, Turandokht welcomed them with great enthusiasm. Hongjun collapsed in the foyer; he had just visited earlier that day, but after running around in terror for hours, he was completely exhausted and refused to move an inch.

"How much did this place cost?" Li Jinglong marveled. "A-Tai, what with the way your wife does business, aren't you losing money? There were barely any customers when I passed earlier today."

"It makes me happy—what's it to you?" Turandokht shot back, leaning against the banister. "Li Jinglong, what do you want to eat?"

Li Jinglong smiled. Turandokht spoke bluntly, but she treated them like her own. "Is Ashina Adarvan here too?" he asked. "Noodles or dumplings would be fine. Let's have some hot food first, so everyone can fill their bellies."

The exorcists trooped up the stairs to the second floor, settling at a table partitioned from the rest of the space by folding screens. Turandokht moved quickly, and in no time, the food arrived. The ravenous men made short work of the spread. Once their bellies were full, Li Jinglong explained

in detail all that had happened at the mausoleum while A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan listened in shock.

“I said I’d go with you, but you wouldn’t let me,” A-Tai said, frowning at Hongjun and Lu Xu.

“How was I supposed to know Xie Yu would be there?” Hongjun moaned. “They said it was a haunting—I didn’t think he’d be involved!”

“What was he doing hiding inside an imperial mausoleum?” Ashina Adarvan wondered. “Absorbing the noxious fumes of your Emperor Taizong’s decaying body? It makes no sense.”

Everyone was perplexed. Yet even stranger than Xie Yu’s sudden appearance was his sudden disappearance after just a few probing attacks.

“It was the same in Dunhuang, wasn’t it? He disappeared into thin air,” A-Tai noted. “Maybe he has some sort of unusual transformation technique?”

“The snake that appeared in Dunhuang was one of his souls,” Lu Xu said. “But the one we saw in the Zhao Mausoleum seemed like his real body! There’s no way such a large snake could vanish like that. There must be a trick to it.”

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. “Next time you investigate a case, you have to gather intelligence first. Question witnesses and look into the events surrounding the murders one at a time. Once you’ve finished sorting through all the information, gather everyone to talk things over. Only after you’ve done *all* of the above should you head to a place like the Zhao Mausoleum to examine the scene of the crime.”

Although in this case, Li Jinglong reflected, it wouldn’t have made much difference. No matter how much intelligence they’d gathered, they still

would have encountered Xie Yu as soon as they set foot in the imperial mausoleum. There was also no way to tell whether Xie Yu had been purposely lying in wait for Hongjun, or whether Hongjun and Lu Xu had stumbled across him by accident.

Nevertheless, Hongjun nodded obediently.

“We’ll go around the table. Everyone share a theory,” Li Jinglong said. “We’ll end our meeting there for today and pick up tomorrow.”

Mergen spoke first. “I think this is a good thing. Xie Yu’s finally come knocking. As long as we don’t make any rash moves, he can’t harm us.”

“Mm.” Li Jinglong nodded thoughtfully.

“My guess is the Zhao Mausoleum is one of his nests,” A-Tai offered. “We’ve uncovered this one, but there are likely more. Maybe there are special passages between the different nests, like how the fox yao used spiritual techniques to travel to and from their akasha realm.”

Li Jinglong considered this briefly. “Makes sense.”

Ashina Adarvan was next: “Chief, let’s hope you guys *did* accidentally run into him today. If not, things may become much more difficult for us.”

“I know.” Li Jinglong glanced at Ashina Adarvan. He had realized this as well. It was one thing if Hongjun and Lu Xu had truly met Xie Yu by accident—but if tonight had been a trap, it meant Xie Yu was capable of some truly terrifying machinations. To draw Hongjun there, he would have had to monitor the Department of Exorcism headquarters and wait for everyone to leave, then arrange for Huang Yong to visit at just the right time and convince Hongjun and Lu Xu to go out alone.

“Huang Yong isn’t a yaoguai,” Li Jinglong said.

“But Xie Yu may be masquerading as a human,” Mergen reminded him.

Indeed, Xie Yu would only have been able to achieve such a thing if he had a human form who also happened to be an official of the imperial court.

“That’s one possibility,” Li Jinglong said. “What else?”

The room settled into a contemplative silence. “Very well,” Li Jinglong said. “We’ll stop here for today.”

The group dispersed, but Li Jinglong remained at the table mulling over the case. He gazed thoughtfully at Hongjun.

“What’re you looking at?” Hongjun asked, awkward under his stare.

“Go fetch some wine,” Li Jinglong said in lieu of an answer.

Hongjun went downstairs and returned with wine and two cups. Li Jinglong poured for himself, then patted the space beside him on the couch. Looping an arm around Hongjun’s waist, he leaned in for a kiss.

Li Jinglong had just declared his feelings last night; it had scarcely been a day since they had gone from friends to lovers. Although Hongjun liked Li Jinglong very much, he wasn’t used to this kind of sudden intimacy, and it pleased and embarrassed him in equal measure. He raised a hand to push Li Jinglong away.

“Why are you so nervous? There’s no one else here,” Li Jinglong murmured into his ear. “You won’t let me touch you when we’re out and about, and you won’t let me hold you when we’re in private. At this rate, I’m going to get pent up.”

Hongjun’s face went scarlet. “It’s embarrassing. I’ve never been…like this…with anyone before.”

“Well, you have me now,” Li Jinglong said, pulling Hongjun into his arms. When he tried to snake a hand beneath Hongjun’s outer robe, Hongjun froze and grabbed his wrist. Li Jinglong went along with it, taking Hongjun’s palm and pressing it to his own chest.

The movement jogged Hongjun’s memory: He loosened Li Jinglong’s inner robe, fingers finding the protective sigil on Li Jinglong’s chest. Both fell silent as Hongjun poured spiritual energy into the mark until finally, he said with satisfaction, “That’s better.”

Yet before he could help Li Jinglong tidy his robes, Li Jinglong was pressing forward again. He wrapped his arms around Hongjun, his collar gaping open to reveal his chest. Flustered, Hongjun whispered, “A-Tai’s still downstairs.”

Li Jinglong nuzzled his cheek. “I was distracted the whole time I was out on Mount Li investigating that case—I missed you so much…”

Hongjun blushed to the roots of his ears; Li Jinglong’s words touched the softest spot in his chest. Turning to face him, he murmured, “I missed you too.”

Li Jinglong’s heated breath carried the faint scent of wine. “You say you miss me, and Gege gets hard. Won’t you touch me?”

Hongjun was speechless. Li Jinglong was more shameless than he had ever imagined. When they were alone, this man’s words were mortifyingly direct, but the most infuriating thing of all was that…Hongjun felt his own body responding too.

“All day I kept thinking—what if once you woke up, you acted like nothing happened?” Li Jinglong pressed Hongjun into the couch, his lips

ghosting over Hongjun's ear. "Can you say it again? Say you like me?"

Hongjun cupped Li Jinglong's cheek. Pinned beneath his body, he could feel Li Jinglong's arousal rubbing against him through the silk of their pants.

"You… Get up, quick." Hongjun could hear Turandokht closing up shop downstairs, but Li Jinglong merely stared at him drowsily, eyes shining with desire. Impulsively, Hongjun threw his arms around Li Jinglong, burying his face in Li Jinglong's shoulder. They lay together, bodies fully clothed but limbs entwined. At last Li Jinglong succumbed to the effects of the wine—he closed his eyes, his breaths evening as he sank into slumber.

The heart lamp in Li Jinglong's chest burned like the blazing sun, warming Hongjun's soul like a balmy spring day. He fell asleep bathed in its gentle glow, impossibly safe in Li Jinglong's embrace.

The clack of the night watch's wooden clapper echoed through Chang'an. It was a few hours past midnight. Dark clouds blanketed the sky, and rainwater dampened the streets. A man in black robes slowly made his way to the foot of Zhuque Bridge, umbrella in hand. He was fair-skinned and wore a strip of dark cloth over his eyes—it was Yuan Kun. His passage seemed to startle the monstrous creatures lurking in the darkness. Demonic energy streamed from all directions toward Zhuque Bridge, coalescing into a malevolent beast with a scarlet head, covered from crown to claws in sharp, black spines and scales. Dark mist poured from its mouth as it bared its fangs and roared, "You do not belong here… Begone, back to the North Sea whence you came. Chang'an is Xie Yu's domain."

More and more yaoguai appeared, crowding the water on both sides of the bridge.

Umbrella in hand, Yuan Kun ascended the bridge, turning a deaf ear to their monstrous howls as he approached the scarlet-headed beast. The ferocious creature snarled and crouched, ready to lunge for him, when Yuan Kun calmly raised two fingers in a sword seal and tapped the beast's exposed fang. He did not slow his pace, brushing past the yaoguai to make his way down the other side of Zhuque Bridge.

The fang Yuan Kun had tapped seemed to ripple. Then, as if the corrosive weight of a thousand years had descended upon it in a single instant, the beast disintegrated with a loud *thrum*.

The yaoguai flanking the bridge fell silent. No longer daring to block Yuan Kun's way, they fled for their lives, hiding in the darkest reaches of the night.

On the second floor of Lanling Amber, Yuan Kun found Hongjun fast asleep with his head pillowed on Li Jinglong's chest and his arms wrapped fast around his waist. Li Jinglong snored softly, sprawled on his back. Yuan Kun pressed his fingers lightly to Li Jinglong's forehead, and a flash of blue light appeared between his brows. His snoring stopped, and he frowned in his sleep as he began to dream.

Waves of demonic energy overwhelmed the sky, and bloody corpses littered the ground. Hongjun stood on a desolate battlefield, a great, howling black dragon circling behind him. In the distance, the city of Chang'an was burning.

Wreathed in dark energy, Hongjun gave a furious cry, his eyes flashing with red light.

“Hongjun… Hongjun!” Mustering the last of his strength, Li Jinglong shouted at Hongjun, standing in the middle of that sea of carnage. Hongjun raised a hand toward him, and the demonic dragon rose into the air and dove at Li Jinglong with a roar.

Li Jinglong dragged his battered and bleeding body closer to Hongjun, his hands glowing with dazzling light. “The living…are but transient guests…”

His deep voice rang throughout the mortal plane. In an instant, the seething black mist receded before the gleaming brightness in his hands.

“The dead…are trav’lers homeward bound.”

This brightness was the sun shining down upon heaven and earth; the stars glittering across the night sky; the heart lamp burning eternally, slicing through the darkness.

“Alas, the world…is just an inn; everything dust…in the wind.” Li Jinglong closed his eyes and pressed a hand to Hongjun’s forehead. The white light expanded outward, illuminating the bloody, corpse-strewn battlefield.

Far away in the waking world, a strange magic silently spread outward from Xingqing Palace. It shuddered through the air like ripples in clear water as it swept over a thousand households in the span of a breath.

Pupils contracting, Yuan Kun withdrew his hand from Li Jinglong’s brow and turned, spreading his arms. His body splintered and transformed

into countless silver flying fish that soared, shimmering, out of the second story of the tavern with a soft rush of air.

“Leave Chang’an,” said a man’s deep voice. Black energy chased after the school of fish, which coalesced back into Yuan Kun’s human form in midair.

“Begone, back to the North Sea whence you came.”

The black energy sharpened into a deadly harpoon and hurtled toward Yuan Kun.

“The laws of heaven are as constant as they are eternal,”[1] Yuan Kun responded dispassionately before transforming into a multitude of shooting stars that arced through the sky. But the black energy was relentless; it transformed again, becoming a great black dragon that shot after him once more.

Yuan Kun soared through the carpet of clouds, now taking the form of a giant kun under the moonlight. With a monstrous roar, he cried, “The laws change for neither virtuous rulers nor despotic tyrants!” The great fish opened his maw, and a blinding bolt of lightning crackled out.

The black dragon dispersed, splitting itself into a swarm of harpoons that rained down on the giant kun like a hail of comets. With a pained roar, the kun sent lightning forking through the sea of clouds, throwing their swirling layers into sharp relief, as if illuminated by a full moon. The giant kun plunged into the cloud cover below, bleeding black energy from a hundred gaping wounds.

The dark energy converged once more, solidifying into the figure of a man. Hovering in midair, he sneered down at the eddies of mist where the

kun had disappeared.

A clap of thunder startled Li Jinglong awake. The sky shook with the rumble of an oncoming storm, yet there was no rain. He opened his eyes beside Hongjun, head aching dully, and shook out his robe. After draping it over the two of them, he wrapped his arms around Hongjun and drifted back to sleep.

The next morning, Hongjun woke to the clamor of the market. Feeling a clammy wetness between his legs, he cursed under his breath and reached down to touch.

Not again! Hongjun's face flushed red. He touched Li Jinglong as well and found that he was also… *Wait, is it because I was rubbing against him? Or is it because he couldn't control himself either last night?*

Hongjun lightly tugged open Li Jinglong's belt and reached into his pants. He'd meant to merely touch the fabric of his undergarments and get to the truth of the matter—but in his haste, he stuck his hand straight down Li Jinglong's underpants.

Ahhhhhh! Wrong one!

Hongjun's questing hand grasped that immense hardness, wetness smearing over his palm. He usually didn't think much of it when he touched himself, but holding Li Jinglong's searing length for the first time made him feel extremely strange. He jolted as if struck by lightning and held his breath, not daring to make a sound as his face contorted into an odd expression.

He ought to loosen his grip—but he couldn't resist giving that length a gentle squeeze. He recalled being shocked by Li Jinglong's dimensions that

day in the hot springs, and now, as he tested its weight in his hand, he thought, *Isn't this way too big?!*

"Enjoying yourself?" Li Jinglong chuckled without opening his eyes.

Hongjun snatched his hand away. "I…I just wanted to see if…"

Li Jinglong grabbed his hand and drew it back, refusing to let him retreat. He opened his eyes, watching Hongjun with a smile as he canted his hips forward, rubbing that hardness against Hongjun's palm. Hongjun's entire body went stiff, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed a mouthful of saliva. A second later, Li Jinglong reached into Hongjun's pants as well.

Hongjun immediately shied away. "Don't… It's all wet…" he said, blushing to the tips of his ears.

"What did you do last night while I was asleep?" Li Jinglong asked, brushing his nose against Hongjun's ear. His voice was soft, but his hands were firm around Hongjun's arousal as he rubbed a teasing thumb against the leaking tip of him.

"Ahh…" Hongjun had no experience with this kind of stimulation. He had only ever touched himself in passing and had never learned how to bring himself off; no one in Yaojin Palace had ever taught him. He was painfully sensitive, and as Li Jinglong made slow circles with his thumb, a shivery wave of ecstasy arced up his spine and made his head buzz.

Li Jinglong pulled Hongjun closer, rocking their bodies together and thrusting that thick length in and out of the circle of Hongjun's fingers.

"Tighten your fist," Li Jinglong said, a slight tremor in his voice. Evidently, he was feeling good too. Hongjun trembled under Li Jinglong's hand, pleasure surging through him like the tide—yet suddenly, Li Jinglong

loosened his hold, taking Hongjun's straining arousal lightly between thumb and forefinger like a horrible tease.

"Ah—*mmph*!"

Li Jinglong stifled his cry with a kiss and slowly eased back, extricating himself from Hongjun's grip. "Someone's coming," he murmured. "We can go the rest of the way when we get home tonight. If you like it, we'll play as much as you want. Now, get up. Let's go and get some breakfast."

Almost before he finished speaking, Hongjun heard the rattle of someone pushing a door open downstairs, followed by Turandokht's voice: "Go up and check on them."

"For lovers, the night is always too short," A-Tai chuckled. "Have some tact."

There was a sharp *crack*—no doubt Turandokht's whip had made an appearance—and A-Tai tactfully bounded over to the staircase and called up, "Chief, Hongjun, are you two awake?" After a pause A-Tai added with an exaggerated lilt, "Ready or not, here I come—!"

He began stomping up the stairs, but found Li Jinglong already awake, leaning lazily against the railing. Hongjun blinked sleepily at A-Tai.

"There's someone looking for you at the Department of Exorcism," A-Tai said. "How much did you drink last night? Shall I fetch you some hair of the dog?"

Li Jinglong hadn't actually drunk much last night; he waved aside A-Tai's offer. Hongjun balled up his underpants—which he had hastily removed—and surreptitiously passed them to Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong stuffed them into his pocket before leading Hongjun downstairs. The heady lust from

earlier had faded, but Hongjun's embarrassment had not. Scratching his head, he turned to Turandokht and thanked her for allowing them to stay the night.

"Would you like some noodles before you leave?" Turandokht asked.

"I'm taking him out for breakfast," Li Jinglong replied as he made his way to the door. "Thank you for your hospitality, Dimei."[2]

"Come again soon," Turandokht called out. A-Tai beamed at the two of them. Hongjun mustered an awkward smile before slinking out the door after Li Jinglong.

The West Market was home to a breakfast stall known as Gilt Jade Rice. Their specialty dish consisted in part of ginkgo nuts, cored to remove their bitter center; tender spring bamboo shoots; and delicate silken tofu slowly simmered in a pork-bone-and-chicken broth.

"The deities gaze upon the mortals with covetous eyes, for which among them doesn't wish to descend and eat a bowl of gilt jade rice! Your order, good sirs!" The waiter emerged balancing six large bowls with the skill of an acrobat. After lining them up on the tables, he proceeded to add a heaping scoop of rice to each, paddle clinking against the bowls' rims.

Hongjun peered into his bowl, half filled with hot, freshly steamed rice topped with a few paper-thin curls of crisp-tender jiaobai.

"How can this possibly be enough food?" Hongjun asked. "Another two bowls, please."

He was about to dig in when Li Jinglong stopped him. "Hold on," he said, nodding toward the stallkeeper, who was tending a large pot of boiling soup.

"Careful, soup incoming!"

The pot was removed from the fire, and a generous ladleful of broth loaded with soft, chewy ginkgo nuts was poured over the rice, transforming the contents into a large bowl of paofan. Soaked in the broth, each grain of rice turned translucent as white jade. Hongjun took a bite. The savory broth, combined with the soft stickiness of the ginkgo nuts and the fresh sweetness of the tofu, was surpassingly delicious.

Each bowl of snow-white paofan was finished with a rich salted duck egg and a small plate of vinegared celery. Hongjun stared in awe.

“Eat as many bowls as you like,” Li Jinglong said.

They had taken seats across from each other at a long table. There weren’t many customers this early in the morning. Li Jinglong scooped a small spoonful of fish floss from a pot on the table and sprinkled it over Hongjun’s bowl. “Take your time. Don’t burn your mouth.”

Li Jinglong had once asked him to eat less, to which he’d replied, *I have money, and I’m growing. What’s wrong with eating a lot?* Remembering this, Hongjun beamed at Li Jinglong and picked up his spoon.

Subjected to the full force of this young man’s smile, affection sparkling in his eyes, Li Jinglong felt as if he were bathing in a warm spring breeze. He blushed and hastily crossed his legs, covering his physical reaction with an awkward cough. “What are you smiling at?”

Hongjun shook his head in amusement as Li Jinglong tugged at the collar of his combat robes and dug into his own breakfast. After a few mouthfuls, a thought seemed to occur to him. “Is it good?” he asked intently. “If it’s good, then have some more.”

Hongjun made a muffled noise of affirmation around his spoon, and Li

Jinglong broke into a smile.

"What're *you* smiling at?" Hongjun's nerves had slowly eased. Now, he only felt that life was truly wonderful when he was with Li Jinglong.

"I'm smiling because, as Gaozi said, it's only natural to have an appetite for food and other carnal pleasures."[3]

"What do you mean?"

Li Jinglong responded with a wink, leaving Hongjun totally baffled. After finishing one bowl, he asked for another. It wasn't until he was halfway through the second that he grasped Li Jinglong's meaning and nearly spat out his mouthful of rice.

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Chapter 83:
Concurrent Cases

AFTER BREAKFAST, instead of leading Hongjun home, Li Jinglong turned down an alleyway and knocked on the door of a humble family residence. Hongjun had already been here twice and recognized it at once as the Chen family's home.

"What are we doing here?" Hongjun asked, perplexed.

After a beat of silence, Li Jinglong said, "I had a strange dream last night. I just wanted to come here to check on them."

Spotting Li Jinglong at the gate, Mistress Duan hurried out with her child in her arms. The boy had recently turned one, and when she set him down, he crawled around gurgling at Li Jinglong and Hongjun.

"You dreamed about the heart lamp?" Hongjun shot Li Jinglong a glance.

Li Jinglong made no response. He took out some money for Mistress Duan, who hastily assured him that it was far too much, and that there was no way she could spend it all. Li Jinglong, however, insisted.

"Does he have a milk name?" he asked, nodding toward her son.

"I call him Hou-er," Mistress Duan said. "I heard Chief Li is a marquis now. I was planning on bringing Hou-er to come pay our respects, but I walked through Jincheng Ward several times and couldn't find the Department of Exorcism."

Mistress Duan lifted her skirts to kneel before them, but Hongjun hurriedly stopped her. Li Jinglong said, “I’ll pick out some calligraphy samples one of these days and send them over for Hou-er to practice from when he gets older—if you don’t mind making do with my writing, that is.”

Mistress Duan thanked him profusely. Li Jinglong had only come to check on the child, and after assuring himself of the boy’s well-being, he and Hongjun left soon after.

They walked slowly along the street. Hongjun remained silent, letting the spring breeze wash over him. Li Jinglong seemed to have something on his mind. Stepping closer, Hongjun tugged on his sleeve, about to call out to him. Li Jinglong grabbed his hand and laced their fingers together. Squeezing Hongjun’s hand, he said, “Hongjun, tell me. Was I destined to become the bearer of the heart lamp?”

Hongjun’s expression grew somber. “Probably. I guess this is what they mean by fate.”

He’d never given the matter much thought. But in retrospect, there’d been many seemingly coincidental events that now appeared interconnected, as if they had happened for a reason. If Hongjun hadn’t chased Fei’ao, he would never have run into Li Jinglong, and the heart lamp wouldn’t have shattered. Similarly, if he had succeeded in giving the heart lamp to the Chen family’s sole living descendant as planned, he would have fallen under the demon-possessed Lu Xu’s complete control and killed Li Jinglong and Mergen back in Liang Prefecture.

It was as if everything had been preordained by the will of heaven. Hongjun carefully considered all that had happened and was struck by a sense of awe.

Yet Li Jinglong's question had also drawn out another memory—one still blurry beyond recognition, to the point that even the one who had been at the center of those events had forgotten them completely.

As they walked, Li Jinglong turned his thoughts over in his mind. When they arrived at the Department of Exorcism, Hongjun released Li Jinglong's hand so he could open the door. He still had to wash his soiled underpants, so he hurried into the courtyard.

"I see the Marquis of Yardang is a busy man."

Hongjun's footsteps slowed to a halt. He turned and spotted a familiar figure beneath the sky well: the Right Chancellor, Yang Guozhong.

Li Jinglong started in surprise. "Chancellor Yang."

Within the Department of Exorcism, Qiu Yongsi was the only one aside from Li Jinglong with any experience in dealing with government officials. Mergen, Lu Xu, and Ashina Adarvan had never held any official position, much less interacted with someone as powerful as the Right Chancellor, who was second only to the emperor. Even so, Li Jinglong had been clear on the fact that Yang Guozhong went out of his way to make things difficult for him; everyone knew this man was not an ally. No one had been willing to speak to him, lest he trick them into saying something that could be held against them.

Li Jinglong shooed Hongjun toward his room and escorted Yang Guozhong into the main hall. Begging the chancellor's pardon, he excused himself to change his clothes so he could receive his guest properly.

Yang Guozhong had never experienced such poor hospitality. Out of all the officials in the nation, from the most highly ranked ministers of the Three Departments to the most insignificant county magistrates, who didn't bow their heads and greet him with utmost deference? Yet these lawless

miscreants of the Department of Exorcism had the audacity to leave him standing out in the courtyard. Now that Li Jinglong had at long last returned to meet him, he had the gall to go change his clothes as Yang Guozhong waited again. Most hateful of all was the fact that when the Department of Exorcism was first re-established, it had been placed under Yang Guozhong's purview. Li Jinglong had once been his direct subordinate, yet still he suffered this treatment. The arrogance of this man beggared belief.

In truth, Li Jinglong had gone to change his clothes simply to buy himself a little time to think. There were no carriages or horses outside, nor had he spotted any attendants. No one from the Court of Judicial Review or the Ministry of Justice had accompanied Yang Guozhong here—but why? How long had he been waiting? Did he come first thing in the morning? This must have been why A-Tai had come to tell him that he should go home as quickly as possible.

If Yang Guozhong had come so early in the morning, then whatever he wished to discuss must be of grave importance. Questions raced through Li Jinglong's mind as he washed his face and gave himself a cursory wipe down. He laced his bracers over the sleeves of a fresh set of combat robes and hurried back into the main hall.

Yang Guozhong's face was like a thundercloud, but Li Jinglong affected not to notice. He motioned for the Right Chancellor to speak.

"I presume you have already been to the Zhao Mausoleum," Yang Guozhong said grimly.

"I have." Li Jinglong showed no sign of surprise. The city was filled with Yang Guozhong's spies; there was no way to keep his movements hidden.

“And have you come to any conclusion in your investigation of the yaoguai that appeared at Huaqing Pool on Mount Li?”

“Not yet,” Li Jinglong answered with a shake of his head.

A monstrous fish and a great bird had emerged from the hot springs at Huaqing Palace. Based on the testimonies of the guards on duty, Li Jinglong had surmised they were likely the kun and peng yao kings affiliated with Hongjun—something he had no intention of telling Yang Guozhong.

Yang Guozhong continued his questioning. “And does the incident at the Zhao Mausoleum have anything to do with yaoguai?”

Li Jinglong studied Yang Guozhong with a frown. “That is not yet clear.”

“What killed those men at the Zhao Mausoleum?” Yang Guozhong pressed.

“We’re not sure.”

Yang Guozhong leaned forward slightly. “Marquis,” he said quietly, “this case has already been submitted to the Directorate of Astrology. The noble consort’s birthday is fast approaching. You know very well what ill intentions those bastards of the Imperial Censorate harbor.”

At once Li Jinglong guessed what had precipitated this visit: Yang Guozhong had begun to feel threatened. *So now you’re afraid of being impeached?*

Before he could explain, Yang Guozhong continued, biting out each word: “Do you have any idea how many people died at the Qian Mausoleum last night?”

Li Jinglong started in surprise.

Yang Guozhong watched Li Jinglong, his expression unfathomable. “I suppose you have not yet been informed. Very well. Twenty-five of the Qian Mausoleum’s guards were slaughtered last night—their necks were snapped.”

Cursing softly under his breath, Li Jinglong realized the true gravity of the situation. Yang Guozhong continued, “Will you go take a look for yourself tonight?”

“We’ll move out at once. What did His Majesty say?” Li Jinglong asked, rising to his feet.

“The Court of Judicial Review has kept the news suppressed,” Yang Guozhong said quietly. “I don’t care what you do, but you must get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible. What kind of monster is this?!”

THIRTEENTH YEAR OF TIANBAO,

EIGHTEENTH DAY OF THE THIRD MONTH.

Incident: Haunting at the Qian Mausoleum.

Degree of Difficulty: Earth.

Location: Qian Mausoleum at the northern peak of Mount Liang.

Person(s) Involved: Unknown.

Case Details: On the night of the seventeenth of the third month, a monster appeared at the Qian Mausoleum at the northern peak of Mount Liang and slaughtered twenty-five guards on duty.

Remuneration: Successful capture of the monster will be rewarded with substantial compensation from the Yang family.

Note: Do not disturb His Majesty or any other officials with this matter, lest you lose your head!

As Yang Guozhong strode toward the exit, Li Jinglong was already calling for his subordinates.

“Cheng Xiao of the Court of Judicial Review is leading the investigation at the scene,” Yang Guozhong informed Li Jinglong. “You must keep this matter quiet at all costs.”

“Chancellor,” Li Jinglong replied, his voice low. “Lives are at stake. We must act based on the facts.”

Yang Guozhong drew a deep breath, his anger flaring, but Mergen and the others arrived before he could say anything further. The group watched Yang Guozhong leave in a huff.

“Let’s go!” Li Jinglong called. He directed the exorcists to mount their horses and led them out through the narrow alleyway, but instead of leaving the city, he turned toward A-Tai and Turandokht’s tavern.

Seeing the gang arrive in full battle regalia, A-Tai knew something must have happened. Before he could fetch his own mount, Li Jinglong stopped him and instructed everyone to go sit down inside.

“I didn’t have time to summon you back to headquarters,” Li Jinglong explained, “so let’s talk here.”

Turandokht started toward the back for wine, but A-Tai set out some tea leaves instead. “I received word from Yongsi just now—he’ll be back any moment, so let’s see what he has to say.”

Li Jinglong motioned them toward one of Lanling Amber's private rooms, and everyone took a seat inside, leaving Turandokht to keep watch to ensure no outsiders approached their door. Only then did Li Jinglong divulge the details of his meeting with Yang Guozhong.

"Another haunting?" Mergen murmured.

The Qian Mausoleum was the final resting place of the late empress and emperor Wu Zhao and Li Zhi. The tomb received few visitors. Every year, when Li Longji offered sacrifices to his ancestors, he made a point of avoiding the Qian Mausoleum simply because he bore a grudge against Wu Zhao.

Ashina Adarvan began to laugh. "So what? Are the ghosts of emperors past coming to scare your current emperor?"

"Ay, watch what you say," A-Tai admonished. "His Majesty was the one who lent us this place."

"I'm positive it was Xie Yu we encountered inside the Zhao Mausoleum," Hongjun said.

"Same," Lu Xu agreed.

"Mm." Li Jinglong nodded pensively. "I saw him with my own eyes as well. It was Xie Yu—or at least part of him."

A-Tai glanced at Li Jinglong, but the chief seemed to be pondering some difficult quandary. He muttered under his breath, "This is getting troublesome…"

Mergen spoke up. "I can't believe it's not him."

"We can't draw any conclusions just yet," Li Jinglong said. "But this complicates things. If it's not him, then who could it be?"

“What’s getting troublesome?” Hongjun was struggling to keep up. Mergen, A-Tai, and Li Jinglong seemed to have once again reached some mysterious consensus, while he and Lu Xu were left scratching their heads. “What are you guys talking about?”

The conversation had reached a lull, yet he still had no idea what was going on. Suddenly, Hongjun felt upset. His relationship with Li Jinglong had changed, but it seemed everyone was falling back into the same old pattern of keeping him in the dark to protect him.

Li Jinglong noticed the subtle shift in his mood at once. “Hongjun, actually, it’s—”

“It’s fine.” Hongjun got up. “I’ll go boil water for the tea.”

But Li Jinglong grabbed his arm, stopping him. After a moment of hesitation, he seemed to make up his mind. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to worry.”

Mergen caught his eye and formed a cage with his hands. Li Jinglong nodded. Hongjun was no longer so afraid of Xie Yu, so it should be okay to tell him the truth.

“Go on, then,” Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong leaned back in his chair, a furrow creasing his brow. “These past few days, we’ve been theorizing about possible locations of Xie Yu’s nests. For instance, could it be that—like the nine-tailed fox—he has taken human form and hidden himself in Chang’an?”

“When I was at Dunhuang,” Lu Xu added, “I heard Xie Yu mention the death of the nine-tailed celestial fox more than once. It’s likely he’s in or near Chang’an.”

“I already confirmed the details with Lu Xu,” Mergen cut in. “This is all the information we have.”

While he’d been oblivious, they had already begun their investigation in secret. “So?” Hongjun asked. “What’s the verdict?”

Usually, all that mattered to Hongjun was the conclusion of their discussion, not how they’d gotten there. But this time, even Li Jinglong felt a bit uncertain as to the best course of action.

A rustle of footsteps sounded outside, and Li Jinglong shushed them. It was only when they heard Turandokht speaking with the newcomer that they all breathed a sigh of relief.

A-Tai pulled aside the curtain. “Yongsi’s back!”

Hongjun grinned as a travel-worn Qiu Yongsi squeezed into their private room. “Ay, I’m exhausted. Saozi, some tea if you please!”

During Qiu Yongsi’s absence, Hongjun hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that there was something missing from the Department of Exorcism. Now, they were all gathered together again.

“How was Luoyang?” Li Jinglong asked.

“You guys keep talking.” Qiu Yongsi accepted a cup of tea and took several large gulps. “I’ll tell you once you’re done.”

“There’s been a major incident in Chang’an,” said Li Jinglong.

“You’re joking.” Qiu Yongsi groaned. “And here I thought you all came for a drink—so there’s a case?”

The carp yao spoke up from where he sat on Hongjun’s crossed legs. “Second-in-Command,” he said to Li Jinglong, “finish what you were saying. Where do you think Xie Yu is now?”

“Most likely, right here in Chang’an,” Li Jinglong replied. “In Xingqing Palace, perhaps—someone right by His Majesty’s side.”

“Huh?!” Hongjun was stunned.

Silence descended over the room. Lu Xu glanced at Li Jinglong, then turned to give Hongjun a look. He abruptly recalled Lu Xu’s comments about Li Jinglong’s miraculous ability to come to the right conclusion, despite missing key pieces of information. He couldn’t resist asking, “Why do you say that?”

“It sounds far-fetched, but now that the chief’s mentioned it, I think it makes the most sense,” Mergen said.

“Xie Yu is intimately familiar with the situation in Chang’an.” Li Jinglong took a sip of his tea, then continued evenly, “There are two possible explanations for this. One, he has spies here who constantly report back to him. Two, he is in Chang’an himself.

“Remember, the yao in Chang’an scattered in the aftermath of the nine-tailed fox’s death. There should have been at least a short span of time when the city was devoid of yao. In that case, after losing the nine-tailed fox, Xie Yu should have had to send new spies to Chang’an—but after Wu Qiyu’s death, I made a point of monitoring the city and detected no strange occurrences. Upon returning from Liang Prefecture, I checked through the cases filed by the Court of Judicial Review and found nothing unusual there either. Hongjun, Qing Xiong told you the yao king was in Chang’an. He has a constant stream of information, but there is no evidence of his agents. My guess is that Xie Yu never left, and has always been here.”

Hongjun digested this information in silence.

Qiu Yongsi, on the other hand, showed no sign of surprise, clearly already familiar with Li Jinglong's conjectures. "If I were him," he said, "I'd simply lie low and maintain my cover beside His Majesty while the nine-tailed celestial fox led the charge."

Li Jinglong nodded. "He's almost certainly an official of the imperial court."

"But that's impossible!" Hongjun exclaimed.

Hongjun didn't know much about Great Tang's imperial court, but he had met plenty of officials while following Li Jinglong to and fro. The possibility of the black jiao Xie Yu hiding among them, biding his time, was too terrifying to consider.

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. "We don't have any real clues to work with at the moment; this is all just a hypothesis. Xie Yu is extremely cautious; he's not going to leave traces for us to follow."

Qiu Yongsi nodded. "An obvious trail that allows us to track him down would be suspicious."

"Think about it," A-Tai said. "If even the Duchess of Guo can be replaced with a fox yao, switching out an official or two should be child's play to Xie Yu."

Put this way, it did seem more plausible. Li Jinglong continued, "To be honest, I've had my suspicions since the day the Duchess of Guo died."

"Who do you think it is?" the carp yao asked.

"The first suspect is Yang Guozhong," Li Jinglong said.

A chill shivered up Hongjun's spine. "There's no way!" he objected in a trembling voice. He had met Yang Guozhong on multiple occasions and

never thought the man seemed like a yaoguai in human form.

“It’s plausible,” Qiu Yongsi agreed. “A powerful yaoguai like Xie Yu should be able to transform at will. He wouldn’t deserve the title of yao king if any old exorcist could see through his ruse.”

“But now, I’m not sure he’s such a good fit,” Li Jinglong said with a frown. “The second suspect is Gao Lishi.”

“Unlikely,” Qiu Yongsi said, shaking his head.

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Chapter 84:
The Four Cardinal Vices

EVERYONE FELL SILENT. “Why did you suspect Yang Guozhong?” the carp yao asked at last.

“Because on the day the nine-tailed fox died, Yang Guozhong wasn’t in Chang’an. He’d gone to Fanyang,” Li Jinglong explained. “If Xie Yu had been in Chang’an at the time, do you think he would sit back and watch as we destroyed his plans?”

“We can presume that, after we killed her children, the nine-tailed fox was furious,” Mergen said. “But she didn’t dare exact her vengeance with Xie Yu present—he wouldn’t have allowed it. After all, his goal is to resurrect Mara. He wouldn’t have permitted any course of action that might upset his plans.”

A-Tai nodded. “So the moment Yang Guozhong left, the Duchess of Guo attacked us. She thought she could wipe out the Department of Exorcism before he returned. Obviously, she failed.”

Hongjun was dumbfounded. Despite having experienced all of these events, he had never thought there were so many twists and turns behind the scenes.

“Why did he go to Fanyang?” Lu Xu asked.

“The reason doesn’t matter,” Li Jinglong said.

“No,” Ashina Adarvan countered, “it does matter. Xie Yu would have needed a good reason to leave if his plans were at a delicate stage in

Chang'an."

Li Jinglong considered this. "He went to investigate An Lushan, the military governor of Fanyang, because he suspects him of plotting a…" Here, he paused and affected a peculiar expression as if to say, *A you-know-what*. "But you didn't hear it from me, all right?"

"So then why don't you think he's Xie Yu anymore?" the carp yao piped up once again.

"Because if Xie Yu is Yang Guozhong, he wouldn't make unnecessary trouble for himself by mucking about in imperial mausoleums. All he's doing is providing the Imperial Censorate an opportunity to bring charges against his cousin, the noble consort," Li Jinglong explained.

Hongjun recalled what Huang Yong had said before. It seemed there were quite a number of people in the imperial court who despised the Yang family. The timing of these hauntings at the imperial mausoleums—right before the noble consort's birthday—would give those people a chance to whisper their own counsel in Li Longji's ear.

The discussion had once again reached an impasse.

"I never thought about that…" Hongjun murmured absently.

"Whatever identity Xie Yu has assumed, we know for certain they have one key characteristic," Qiu Yongsi put in.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"They must have met Hongjun during his childhood," Qiu Yongsi finished.

"That's right," Li Jinglong said. "And it must have been after the nine-tailed celestial fox's death that he realized… Hongjun, do you remember

what Wu Qiyu said to you back then?”

Hongjun thought back with effort. “That fox yao was such a chatterbox. She said so much stuff before she died; how could I possibly remember it all?”

Everyone put their faces in their hands.

“Atop the observatory platform,” Li Jinglong prompted him. “She said, ‘I see, it was you all along.’”

“Did she?” Hongjun had no recollection of the conversation whatsoever.

“That’s right!” the carp yao chimed in. “I remember now too! She mentioned Hongjun’s parents…”

Hongjun was astounded. “Zhao Zilong! You knew all this time!”

The carp yao frantically covered his mouth—this time, he had well and truly spilled the beans. Li Jinglong swiftly intervened. “Don’t blame him, Hongjun.”

Curbing his temper, Hongjun satisfied himself with shooting the carp yao a reproachful look.

Mergen picked up where they’d left off: “So it was on the observatory platform that Wu Qiyu discovered the demon seed inside Hongjun—ah, sorry, Hongjun.”

Hongjun waved aside his apology. After a beat of thoughtful silence, he nodded.

“We can assume a small number of other individuals learned the truth of your origins around that time as well—including Xie Yu,” Li Jinglong continued. “So before you left Chang’an for Liang Prefecture, Xie Yu

arranged a series of plots targeting you. To that end, he ordered the plague god and the dark lady, as well as Lu Xu…"

Lu Xu considered this. "That's right. The snow yao let me out of the mural that night to capture Hongjun."

"His plan failed," Li Jinglong said. "But now that Hongjun's returned to Chang'an, there's no way he'll be able to resist coming to see him again."

"That's not necessarily true," Ashina Adarvan interjected. "What if he stays in hiding?"

Li Jinglong spread his hands. "This is all just conjecture. Alternatively, after Wu Qiyu died, the noble consort found out about Hongjun's parents, so we can assume Yang Guozhong learned the details as well. Both Yang Guozhong and the Duchess of Guo are close relations of the noble consort. It makes a lot of sense."

"Who did we meet after coming back to Chang'an?" Hongjun sifted through his memory. *Yang Guozhong, Gao Lishi, Huang Yong, Huang Yong's secretary, the crown prince Li Heng, Li Longji*…

"The fate of the imperial family is tied to both the nation and the Divine Land," Li Jinglong said. "Yongsi mentioned before that the yao race would suffer a calamity if they attempted to touch them, so it's incredibly unlikely that Xie Yu is posing as the emperor or any of his sons. We can eliminate them from the list of suspects."

"Gao Lishi, Yang Guozhong, and Huang Yong," Mergen said thoughtfully. "These three are the most likely suspects. I've visited the Court of Judicial Review on several occasions. I think we can rule out Huang Yong; he just doesn't seem like the type of person we're looking for. You're right—that leaves Gao Lishi and Yang Guozhong."

“I don’t think the black jiao would disguise himself as a eunuch,” Qiu Yongsi said. “And another thing: Given Xie Yu’s abilities, he could have supported a weak and incompetent emperor onto the throne if he wanted to. But Gao Lishi entered the imperial palace as a child, and since then, he has helped His Majesty quell rebellion and even execute Princess Taiping. I also feel like the timing doesn’t make sense. My grandfather came to Chang’an forty years ago in search of the black jiao, and he found no trace of the creature then.”

The carp yao popped his head over the table. “But His Majesty Chong Ming fought a great battle against the black jiao where they both sustained grave injuries. If the black jiao’s you-know-what got burned off during the fight, then it’s entirely possible he would become a eunuch in human form.”

There was a long and awkward silence.

“Yongsi already said the timing’s off,” Li Jinglong ground out. “Stop quibbling over the details. Anyway, it seems the most likely candidate is Yang Guozhong after all.”

“You’re forgetting someone,” Ashina Adarvan said.

Li Jinglong paused. “It’s not her.”

“Who?” Hongjun asked.

“The noble consort,” Mergen said.

Yang Yuhuan had known Hongjun’s family long ago, and once been personally treated by Kong Xuan. She could thus be ruled out.

Hongjun had broken out in gooseflesh. After hearing Li Jinglong’s analysis, he also felt that Yang Guozhong was highly suspicious. Perhaps he

really had collaborated with Wu Qiyu, replaced the original owner of his body, and established himself beside the emperor.

Li Jinglong turned to Lu Xu. “The heart demons Xie Yu created—how many are left?”

Lu Xu shook his head, and Mergen responded for him. “Our encounter with Xie Yu at Dunhuang gave us some clues. To replace the missing demon seed, we know he planted one of his immortal souls in Lu Xu and absorbed demonic energy by gathering nightmares. Once Hongjun ripped away that demonic energy and took it into himself, this first immortal soul fled and returned to Chang’an.”

Hongjun nodded.

“Then that snake we saw in the imperial mausoleum last night was probably another one,” Lu Xu murmured.

“How many heart demons can he create?” Li Jinglong asked.

Mergen raised three fingers.

“So if one was destroyed in Dunhuang, that leaves two unaccounted for,” Hongjun noted. “But if he removed all three of his immortal souls, wouldn’t he die?”

“He probably keeps at least one in his body at all times,” Mergen said. “Or maybe he has some sort of spiritual technique that allows him to look like an ordinary person even when all three of his immortal souls are sent elsewhere.”

“At that high a level of cultivation, a yao’s soul becomes extremely powerful,” the carp yao said. “Xie Yu is different from Lu Xu, who was weakened when his immortal souls were divided during his reincarnation.

With one immortal soul and seven mortal forms, Xie Yu's fighting strength would only be a little reduced; under normal circumstances, you probably wouldn't notice a difference."

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. "Now that you know this, you should avoid meeting Yang Guozhong again. If you stare at him, you'll um…uhh…"

As Li Jinglong fumbled, Hongjun belatedly realized why he had kept him in the dark. Upsetting as it was, Li Jinglong had simply been worried Hongjun would inadvertently let something slip in Yang Guozhong's presence and ruin their plans.

"Let's continue our investigation," Mergen cut in. "The truth will inevitably reveal itself."

"It's just—this seems like a trap," Li Jinglong muttered. "It's too strange."

"You're right." A-Tai thought for a moment. "He waited until we had all left headquarters before luring Hongjun and Lu Xu out."

"But Chancellor Yang didn't send Justice Huang," Hongjun said. "And isn't it just a coincidence we were the only two there?"

"Indeed," Li Jinglong said with an arch of his brow. "You ran into Xie Yu in the Zhao Mausoleum yesterday by accident—that's how it seems, right? But consider: We came back to Chang'an, so Xie Yu orchestrated a series of incidents to draw the rest of us away, creating an opportunity to… To be honest, I have no idea what he wants with you, but in any case, it was all so he could corner you without us there."

A-Tai kneaded his brow as if suffering a headache. "That does make sense."

“But does it?” Mergen asked. “Would a yao king who’s managed to hide himself for so long really use such an obvious tactic?”

Ashina Adarvan turned to Li Jinglong. “Right now, the person he fears most is you. If it were me, I’d off you first, and then take my time doing everything else.”

Li Jinglong nodded, muttering, “That’s why I thought once we got back, Xie Yu would immediately come after me.”

“Would you like to hear what I found?” Qiu Yongsi asked. “I discovered something interesting on my trip to Luoyang.”

Everyone pricked up their ears.

Qiu Yongsi had been traveling practically nonstop, riding day and night to investigate the case of the brain-eating monster in Luoyang. He discovered that the reports of the murdered children were real, but the culprit was merely a macaque that had cultivated into a yao. Fortunately, it seemed even Qiu Yongsi didn’t find the creature especially terrifying to behold; as he told it, he hardly broke a sweat as he dutifully sealed the macaque yao’s powers before giving it a beating.

This was exactly as Li Jinglong intended—it was essential that Qiu Yongsi learned to deal with yaoguai himself.

As punishment for committing such unspeakable evil, Qiu Yongsi explained, he had planned to destroy the macaque yao’s soul so that it could no longer enter the wheel of reincarnation. Desperate to preserve its life, the creature had betrayed the yao king Xie Yu and divulged his location to Qiu Yongsi. According to the macaque, he was indeed in Chang’an.

“Remember the sand snake you guys caught in Dunhuang?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

At his prompting, everyone recalled the incident. Li Jinglong said, “I sent him off on a mission.”

This was news to everyone. “What mission?” Mergen asked.

Li Jinglong took a slow sip of his tea. “I gave him information on one of our weak points to deliver to Xie Yu. I was hoping he’d lower his guard and come deal with me, thus revealing his identity. Don’t worry about that, keep going.”

“The sand snake and that idiot macaque I caught—neither of them is from the Central Plains,” Qiu Yongsi continued. “Xie Yu summoned a number of yao from Western Liang and Southern Zhao to the Central Plains to help him resurrect Mara.”

“I don’t understand,” Hongjun said uneasily. “What’s Xie Yu trying to do? Resurrect Mara? Or *become* Mara?”

“That’s the interesting thing I managed to uncover,” Qiu Yongsi said. “After spending years searching fruitlessly for the demon seed of Mara, Xie Yu decided to use his three immortal souls to create a replacement for the demon seed, resulting in his three heart demons—one of which we encountered in Dunhuang. If he succeeds in this endeavor with any one of his souls, he will recover all three of them and obtain the greatest power the world has ever seen.”

“A macaque yao managed to get hold of such important information?” Li Jinglong frowned. “How do we know this isn’t another trick?”

“Why does everything start to seem suspicious after hanging around you, Chief?” Ashina Adarvan asked. “You Han folk sure have a talent for treachery.”

“It’s ‘Marquis’ now,” Li Jinglong said. “And we Han folk are paying your salary and assisting in the restoration of your nation. Do you want to get paid or not? You’re still on probation.”

Ashina Adarvan pressed his lips shut.

“I’m only telling you what I heard,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Just as the dark lady and the plague god watched over Lu Xu, one of the other heart demons has four yaoguai subordinates protecting it. This macaque once worked for one of these subordinates harvesting fresh…uhh… He was working for one of the guards.” Qiu Yongsi shot Hongjun and Lu Xu a glance.

“Gathering…humans to eat?” Lu Xu guessed.

This revelation left Hongjun deeply uncomfortable. He was, after all, half yao—to think his fellow yaoguai could be so brutal. “If Chong Ming becomes the yao king again,” he said, “the first thing I’ll do is make them stop killing and eating humans.”

“Humans eat crab roe, suckling pigs, and spring chickens all the time, don’t they?” the carp yao said. “It can’t be helped. It’s not like everyone can subsist on vegetables.”

The rest of the group thought it best not to comment on this. “If there comes a day when our dear Hongjun becomes a yao king, we’ll leave it to you,” Qiu Yongsi said.

While Hongjun was trying to decide whether to laugh or cry, Li Jinglong spoke up. “There are also many humans who do deplorable things.

Hongjun, do you hate me for it?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s why we won’t hate you either,” A-Tai said with a smile. “Just look at our chief—I mean, our marquis. He loves you to pieces.”

Li Jinglong coughed as Hongjun flushed with embarrassment. Sensing the subtle shift in the atmosphere, Qiu Yongsi stared at the two of them in shock before glancing at A-Tai, his question clear—*They’re together?*

“That’s enough,” Li Jinglong interrupted. “What else did the macaque say? One of the heart demons has four guardians. What else?”

“The guardians are assembling an army of yaoguai,” Qiu Yongsi said. “But they’re avoiding Chang’an. They’re gathering them in the north.”

“The north?” Struck by a thought, Li Jinglong asked, “Did he say where in the north?”

Qiu Yongsi shook his head slowly. “What I heard was, aside from the yao king, who personally presides over Chang’an, there are four great yaoguai guardians who, as of a few months ago, have been making their way south. Presumably, they have reached Chang’an by now.”

Hongjun started in shock.

“*Four* of them? But we haven’t noticed anything,” A-Tai said.

“How do they compare to the dark lady and the plague god?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I’m not sure.” Qiu Yongsi sighed. “I don’t really know anything about the ranking system within the yao race.”

Hongjun knew even less than Qiu Yongsi. He glanced at the carp yao, who said, “It’ll take forever to explain. I’ll draw you guys a chart later.”

“What kind of yao are these four subordinates?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I’m not sure about their original forms,” Qiu Yongsi answered, “but he referred to them as the four cardinal vices: Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath. That’s all I have.”

“Everyone, get ready to move,” Li Jinglong said, rising from the table. “We’ll be splitting up and working separately. I’ve more or less figured it all out.”

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Chapter 85:
Death by Drink

THE THIRD MONTH'S sun shone brightly after the rain. Li Jinglong stepped out of the tavern and divided the group into two teams: Mergen, Lu Xu, Qiu Yongsi, and A-Tai would first return to the Zhao Mausoleum, while Li Jinglong, Hongjun, and Ashina Adarvan would head to the Qian Mausoleum. He beckoned A-Tai over and gave him a series of low-voiced instructions.

Qiu Yongsi had barely caught his breath after returning to Chang'an, but he insisted on joining them. Li Jinglong didn't try to dissuade him.

"This next stretch will be tough on all of us, but once we've closed this case, I'll take you all out for some proper fun."

"You still owe us for last time," Qiu Yongsi quipped as he tossed something to Li Jinglong.

Catching it, Li Jinglong said, "As if I would forget! Now, let's go!"

Everyone mounted their horses and departed Chang'an as if riding out on a pleasant spring excursion.

Hongjun had thought he and Li Jinglong would be alone on this mission, so he was surprised to find Ashina Adarvan accompanying them as well. This was his first time working with A-Tai's friend in any official capacity, and he couldn't help his curiosity about the young Göktürk man. The one and only time they had ever joined forces was when they had faced that swift dark Lu Xu amid the corpse-ghost army. A-Tai had warned Ashina Adarvan off teasing Hongjun, so after returning to Chang'an, Ashina Adarvan

had seldom sought him out, a move that had left Hongjun even more intrigued.

As for Li Jinglong, he was never anything but professional in the presence of others.

Located on Mount Liang, directly north of the capital, the Qian Mausoleum was a short ride from Chang'an. Due to Li Longji's increasingly transparent hatred for Wu Zhao after she deposed her son Emperor Zhongzong, the Qian Mausoleum had been allotted only fifty guards—far fewer than the Zhao Mausoleum. A full half of these had died during last night's haunting. Utterly petrified, the remaining men wished for nothing more than to flee back to Chang'an; only the imperial guard's order that any who deserted their post would be beheaded kept them in place. Nevertheless, the guards dared not get within a thousand paces of the Qian Mausoleum, cutting the monument a wide, fearful berth.

Once a part of the six divisions of the imperial guard, the mausoleum guard had become an independent unit over time. Its members neither took to the battlefield nor accompanied the emperor on his outings. Eventually, supervision of this guard was transferred to the Ministry of Rites, where they went through the motions of assisting the emperor and his court officials the handful of times they came to offer sacrifice to his ancestors throughout the year. In a period when even soldiers rarely saw true combat, who would expect to lose their lives guarding a tomb?

By the time Li Jinglong and the others arrived, the mausoleum guards were quivering with fright, as if bracing themselves to face an enemy army. They couldn't run away, but they didn't dare approach the mausoleum either. Twenty-five bodies lay on the parade grounds before the monument, covered

with white shrouds. An aide from the Imperial Court of Judicial Review and the bailiff from the local yamen stood watching over the dead.

“The Department of Exorcism is here!”

“Li Jinglong! It’s Li Jinglong!”

The guards who had been burning incense and clutching their Buddhist prayer beads or lucky jade charms greeted Li Jinglong like their savior. It took everything they had not to shove him straight into the Qian Mausoleum. The people of Chang’an had once mocked Li Jinglong for being an idler who dreamed up demons and deities and never did an honest day’s work—yet now, the sight of this man filled them with sincere admiration. Before, they didn’t believe in the supernatural, so they felt no fear. Now that they believed, Li Jinglong’s profession as a ghost catcher was suddenly a wholly respectable trade.

The aide from the Court of Judicial Review personally came forward to greet them. “My lord,” he said as he made his obeisance to Li Jinglong, then cupped his hands and bowed to Hongjun and Ashina Adarvan as well.

“Ah, you’re Cheng…Cheng…” Hongjun struggled to remember the name Huang Yong had given him.

“Cheng Xiao,” the young aide supplied.

Cheng Xiao appeared around seventeen or eighteen years of age, only slightly older than Hongjun. Youthfully attired, he was a handsome young man, though his looks paled in comparison to Hongjun’s fine features.

“Oh? You’re working at the Court of Judicial Review now?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun was surprised to find that the two knew each other. Li Jinglong explained, “Cheng Xiao was once in the Longwu Guard. He was known for being a genius detective with a meticulous eye for detail.”

“How can I accept such praise?” Cheng Xiao said with a smile. “I haven’t even congratulated the chief for being so recently conferred the title of marquis.”

If Cheng Xiao was an aide in the Court of Judicial Review at the age of eighteen, he must have real skill. Hongjun recalled that when Huang Yong had come to inform them about the case, he had mentioned something about Cheng Xiao entering the Zhao Mausoleum. However, with the detour he and Lu Xu had taken, they hadn’t crossed paths.

That’s right, everyone’s a genius. I’m the only one who’s an idiot, Hongjun thought. *First Qin Wu and now Cheng Xiao—these young men all seem very familiar with Li Jinglong.*

Noticing the dip in his mood, Ashina Adarvan tossed him a wink, which Hongjun pretended not to see. *How do these guys always seem to know what I’m thinking?* he grumbled to himself.

“Tell me what happened,” Li Jinglong said.

“On the night of the thirteenth,” Cheng Xiao diligently began, “a five-man team of guards on duty at the Zhao Mausoleum was reportedly attacked while patrolling the premises.”

Hongjun walked over to the rows of corpses yet to be laid to rest. They had been placed here the night before, lending the parade grounds in front of the imperial mausoleum an unnervingly bleak atmosphere.

“Four men were killed on the spot, while the fifth went mad. I investigated the scene with the local bailiff and discovered a trail of blood leading to the entrance of the Zhao Mausoleum. The trail ended right at the dragon-severing stone, which may indicate the entrance was open at the time of the incident.”

That’s pretty much what I found too, Hongjun thought. “But the dragon-severing stone was covered in blood,” he said aloud. “Like something slammed into it.”

Cheng Xiao and Li Jinglong both turned toward Hongjun.

“My hypothesis is that one of the victims crashed into the stone while attempting to flee,” Cheng Xiao replied. “His neck snapped, creating the puddle of blood. After the dragon-severing stone opened, the body was dragged inside.”

Hongjun dropped to one knee and lifted the white cloth from one of the corpses’ faces. A stomach-turning stench filled his nose, and he nearly vomited.

“We lifted the dragon-severing stone and found a body inside the central chamber of the mausoleum,” Cheng Xiao finished.

“What happened to the man that went mad?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Dead,” Cheng Xiao answered. “He expired from sheer terror. Based on the evidence gathered at the scene, I’ve posited that a pair of guards heard strange noises coming from inside the mausoleum. They went inside to investigate, then ran back out. One died from a broken neck, while the other lost his mind from fright—”

Ashina Adarvan guessed the rest: “So a yaoguai chased them out and killed the other three members of their team before dragging the mad one back inside.”

“A yaoguai… Well,” Cheng Xiao conceded. “Perhaps it was.”

“What else did you find inside the mausoleum?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Nothing,” Cheng Xiao responded. “We only found the madman’s body.”

Hongjun traded a glance with Li Jinglong. *Nothing? But what about Xie Yu?*

Cheng Xiao had gone into the mausoleum, brought out a dead body, and closed the door behind him—only for Hongjun and Lu Xu to find Xie Yu inside mere hours later?

Before Hongjun could question it, Li Jinglong silenced him with a look.

“As for the situation here,” Cheng Xiao continued, “I hurried over from the Court of Judicial Review when we got the news at dawn. I only arrived about two hours ago.”

Hongjun went back to examining the corpse he had uncovered. The man’s face had turned the purple-black of a bruise—perhaps the consequence of some strange poison—and emanated a nauseating stench. Dropping down beside him, Ashina Adarvan pulled out a throwing knife and poked gently at the corpse.

When Hongjun frowned, Ashina Adarvan merely waved a hand and handed him a perfumed sachet. Li Jinglong, noticing the exchange, called out, “Hongjun, come here.”

Hongjun hummed in acknowledgment but didn’t move. Together with Ashina Adarvan, he examined the victims’ bodies as Cheng Xiao explained, “All twenty-five of these men were on duty last night. Their necks were broken, but they also exhibit signs of poisoning. There’s no need to examine them further; I’ve already tested them with my silver needle. Whatever they were poisoned with, it’s undetectable.”

“Some poisons derived from plants can’t be detected after death,” Hongjun countered. “Silver needles are only effective at detecting common poisons.”

“And this certainly isn’t a common one,” Ashina Adarvan added.

“So there’s nothing unusual inside the Qian Mausoleum, and there are no signs of the door having been opened?” Li Jinglong asked.

“No,” Cheng Xiao confirmed. “This case is more difficult than the Zhao Mausoleum. There are no witnesses.”

After the murders at the Zhao Mausoleum, the remaining mausoleums had been assigned additional personnel. In all likelihood, the news of the attacks had already spread.

“We ought to go take another look at the Zhao Mausoleum and compare the crime scenes,” Cheng Xiao said.

“I’ve already sent members of the Department of Exorcism out there,” Li Jinglong said, making his way over to where Hongjun and Ashina Adarvan were examining another young man’s uncovered corpse.

“They’re just kids,” Li Jinglong observed. “What kind of yao did this?”

Cheng Xiao shook out a pair of gloves—they were similar, Hongjun noticed, to the pair Li Jinglong used—and put them on.

“You’ve become quite good at this,” Li Jinglong commented.

“It’s all thanks to your guidance,” Cheng Xiao said, perfectly polite. “But really—yao?”

“You still don’t believe in the existence of monsters?” Li Jinglong’s tone was conversational.

Cheng Xiao began to prepare to examine the corpse again. “Forgive me for being blunt, my lord,” he said, “but I don’t really believe in the supernatural. Unless I see it with my own two eyes…”

Hongjun hesitated, then patted the carp yao on his back. “Zhao Zilong, get down here. It’s time to get to work.”

The carp yao had been listening in silence inside Hongjun’s bag. Now he leapt out, turned a neat flip in the air, and landed firmly on the ground with the sachet of oblivion pollen clutched in his hands. He glanced around. “Reporting for duty!”

The bailiff yelped in alarm, while Cheng Xiao visibly struggled to stay calm.

“Do you believe me now?” Li Jinglong asked.

The carp yao stroked his whiskers as he approached the rows of corpses. “They smell weird.”

Cheng Xiao stared hard at the carp, then nodded his head with an air of disquiet.

“All twenty-five of them smell like this,” Ashina Adarvan said.

“Can you tell what it is?” Hongjun asked the carp yao.

Fish were possessed of a keen sense of smell underwater, but this sense was much duller on land. Struck by inspiration, Li Jinglong crooked a finger

at the fish. “Come here.”

He fetched a bucket of water from the mausoleum guard’s barracks, plunked the carp yao inside, and tossed in one of the corpses’ helmets. The moment the helmet sank into the water, the carp yao surfaced with a splash.

“Alcohol!” he exclaimed, the helmet wobbling atop his head.

“Drink…drinking is commonplace in the army.” It was Cheng Xiao’s first time conversing with a carp, and he was obviously in a state of considerable turmoil. It took all he had to maintain a veneer of calm, and his mind went briefly blank as he struggled to remember what he wanted to say.

“Alcohol,” Ashina Adarvan repeated. “Those who die from drink all smell like this.”

“What?” Cheng Xiao was stunned. How much liquor did it take for twenty-five men to drink themselves to death?

Hongjun rarely drank, but he trusted Zhao Zilong’s nose. Clutching the helmet to his chest, the carp yao pattered over to its owner and took a deep whiff. Hongjun shivered in disgust at the sight, but to the carp yao, it was no different from when humans sniffed seafood to check for freshness. After a moment, Zhao Zilong declared, “They drank themselves to death.”

Cheng Xiao was completely flabbergasted.

“You still have much to learn,” Li Jinglong said quietly.

Li Jinglong met Ashina Adarvan’s eyes as Hongjun headed for the barracks. The ground was littered with debris, and the faint, sour scent of liquor lingered in the air. Ashina Adarvan picked up a cup and sniffed it. “Strong stuff.”

Last night, the mausoleum guards must have had quite a bit to drink. But none of the investigators had ever seen anyone drink themselves to death.

They walked back to the entrance of the Qian Mausoleum, Li Jinglong striding at the head of the group. “You can go back,” he told Cheng Xiao.

The aide, however, seemed determined to stay; he left the bailiff waiting outside and followed Li Jinglong into the mausoleum.

An iron gate, over three yards tall, blocked the entrance of the Qian Mausoleum. Its bars were wrapped in iron chains and set with a heavy lock. Hongjun was already reaching for his knives to cut through it when Cheng Xiao hurriedly said, “I’ll go borrow the key.”

Ashina Adarvan held up a hand to stop him. Inserting the tip of his throwing knife into the keyhole, he fiddled around until, after a series of soft clicks, the lock fell open.

A chilly draft swirled out of the dark mausoleum, carrying the same sour stench that clung to the bodies on the parade grounds. They stepped inside. The farther they walked along the passageway, the stronger the smell became. “Should I light the braziers?” Hongjun whispered.

“No,” Li Jinglong said. “There’s no need.” He pulled out a small, buzzing box and opened it to release three fireflies, which flitted deeper into the passageway.

With so many people—and especially Li Jinglong—present, Hongjun wasn’t nearly as anxious as last time. Still, he couldn’t resist edging closer to Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong, in turn, shuffled forward to shield Hongjun behind him.

“Why don’t you wait outside?” Li Jinglong suggested.

“No way.”

Cheng Xiao glanced back at Hongjun in surprise in the dimly lit passageway.

“What’s wrong?” Hongjun asked, puzzled.

Cheng Xiao didn’t respond. As they approached the main hall, Hongjun’s nerves came rushing back, and he broke out in a cold sweat. The chambers of the tomb were connected via a complex system of passageways, like a great underground maze.

The Qian Mausoleum had been built to mimic the layout of Chang’an, with an outer city wall surrounding the Imperial City. There were even a number of halberd-wielding guards cast in iron lining either side of the tomb, keeping watch over the countless burial objects and sancai pottery figurines within.

Traditionally, the Son of Heaven would only venture this far into the mausoleum when offering sacrifice. Further ahead was a door, beyond which lay the chamber containing Li Zhi and Wu Zetian’s coffins.

“Shall we keep going?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

His voice was loud in the hush of the tomb; Li Jinglong quickly raised a hand to stop him from speaking any further. He looked up and spotted an air vent. Turning to the carp yao, he said, “Zhao Zilong, if you would?”

Hongjun tossed the carp yao upward. The fish caught the ledge, then crawled through the vent with a flip of his tail. Everyone waited in the dimness.

“There’s nothing in here, just a pair of coffins. But they reek of alcohol inside,” the carp yao called.

Li Jinglong glanced at the door in the center of the main hall. “Let’s go,” he said quietly.

Cheng Xiao seemed about to protest, but Li Jinglong silenced him with a shake of his head. When they had exited the mausoleum, Li Jinglong turned to him. “Go back to the Court of Judicial Review. Tell Justice Huang the Department of Exorcism is taking over this case and there’s no need for him to concern himself with it anymore, unless he intends to send this poor bailiff to the executioner’s block.”

“But…” Cheng Xiao appeared conflicted.

“No buts,” Li Jinglong said sternly. He gestured toward the bailiff standing in the distance, then gave Zhao Zilong a pointed look. The carp yao obediently scampered over. A short moment later, they heard the bailiff sneeze, and the carp yao bounded back.

Cheng Xiao studied Li Jinglong for a moment, but there was nothing he could say. Li Jinglong instructed the remaining guards to send the deceased back to Chang’an, where they were to be handed over to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review for burial.

“Are we meeting up with the others?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

“No,” Li Jinglong responded. “We’re heading back to Chang’an. Ashina Adarvan, do you know how to draw an array? Go draw something random outside the mausoleum, anything you like.”

Ashina Adarvan didn’t question him. He sketched out the mark of the Zoroastrian god of war to reassure the mausoleum guards as Li Jinglong explained there would be no more ghosts. He repeatedly assured the men they

had nothing to fear before leaving the Qian Mausoleum with his subordinates in tow.

Three men and one fish returned to Chang'an. Although they had agreed to meet the others at the tavern, Li Jinglong instead led them straight back to the Department of Exorcism.

Hongjun was already striding into the main hall when Li Jinglong hooked a finger in the back of his collar.

"Go change into civilian clothes," he said.

Hongjun blinked in confusion. Aside from his exorcist uniform, he had only one set of rough-spun robes. But Li Jinglong had given clear instructions; he returned to his room and put them on.

A short span later, the three exorcists reconvened in the rear courtyard. Li Jinglong led the way in surreptitiously scaling the courtyard wall and hopping into their neighbor's property.

Next door to the Department of Exorcism was the Chang'an Department of Rural Land Allocation, responsible for authorizing grants of farmland in the Guanzhong Plain region under the jurisdiction of Chang'an. It was an unglamorous government office—and thus free of corruption—which only ever became busy in the primary farming seasons of spring and autumn. The rest of the time, the handful of honest and upright civil officials who worked there had little to do beyond approving documents, calculating acreages, and picking at the plastered walls in boredom.

After all three exorcists landed quietly on the other side of the wall, Li Jinglong pushed open the Department of Rural Land Allocation's back door and led the other two back out into the city.

Taking a winding series of twists and turns, they merged with the crowd of people leaving the city and departed Chang'an once more. As soon as they were beyond the city walls, Li Jinglong rented a donkey cart and struck out for Mount Fenghuang in the northwest.

"Where are we going?" Hongjun had no idea what Li Jinglong was up to, but found sitting in the donkey cart rather fun.

"There's no use hiding," Ashina Adarvan said. "If they're really monitoring us, a change of clothes won't fool them."

"I'm betting they won't notice," Li Jinglong responded. "We have to take the gamble."

"Who's monitoring us?" Hongjun asked.

"Xie Yu's spies," Li Jinglong answered. "If I were him, I would be keeping a close eye on us."

"So then where are we going now?" Hongjun asked again.

"The Ding Mausoleum."

The Ding Mausoleum was the final resting place of Emperor Zhongzong, Li Xian. Li Longji had been much closer to Li Xian than the other interred emperors, and consequently, the latter's tomb was by far the most luxurious.

"How many mausoleums are there?" Ashina Adarvan asked.

"There's also the Xian Mausoleum, the tomb of Emperor Gaozu, and the Qiao Mausoleum, the tomb of Emperor Ruizong," Li Jinglong answered.

Prior to Li Longji, there had been six emperors of the Tang dynasty, including the empress Wu Zhao. As Wu Zhao and Li Zhi shared the same tomb, however, there were only five imperial resting places—the Xian, Zhao,

Qian, Ding, and Qiao Mausoleums—located on various mountains around Chang'an. Hongjun could now vaguely see the shape of Li Jinglong's plan: He intended to wait for the enemy to come to them.

"The imperial mausoleums…" Li Jinglong mused. "Somehow, I feel like we should expect something to happen at all five of them. Now that Xie Yu's gotten started, he's trying to lure us to each of them in turn."

"Not necessarily," Ashina Adarvan countered. "We can't rule out that Xie Yu's just not that smart."

Not long thereafter, they arrived at the Ding Mausoleum.

"Ashina Adarvan, pick the lock for us, then meet A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi at the Qiao Mausoleum," Li Jinglong instructed. "This way, we'll have three teams."

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Chapter 86:
Confessions in the Underground Palace

THE SKY DIMMED as dusk approached. The guards outside the Ding Mausoleum had all retreated a fair distance from the entrance—evidently, they had heard of the hauntings at the other mausoleums and dared not come any closer. The three exorcists hid themselves and waited, observing their surroundings. When Li Jinglong was satisfied, Ashina Adarvan stepped forward to unlock the Ding Mausoleum's gate.

Li Jinglong turned to the carp yao, whose body was small enough to fit in the air vent above the tomb. "Zhao Zilong, you keep watch outside. Come in through there and let us know if anyone arrives but doesn't come in."

He did as Li Jinglong said and took cover in a small space between the pond and the waterway beneath the stone railing outside the Ding Mausoleum.

"Let's go!" Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun, and the two ducked into the Ding Mausoleum. The instant they were in, Ashina Adarvan replaced the lock on the gate behind them.

"He's locking us in…?" Hongjun asked, but Li Jinglong was already pulling him deeper inside.

"If necessary, he'll come back tomorrow morning and let us out," Li Jinglong said. Hongjun raised a hand to summon fire, but Li Jinglong grabbed his wrist, stopping him. It was pitch-dark. All he could hear was Li Jinglong's voice beside his ear. "Hold on tight."

Like the Qian Mausoleum, the passageways of the Ding Mausoleum formed an intricate maze. Hongjun would have stumbled in the dark, but Li Jinglong held his hand in a firm grip, guiding him toward the wall. Amazingly, Li Jinglong seemed to know the place well. They walked, fingers trailing against the wall, until Li Jinglong pulled to a halt. Hongjun couldn't see anything; he could only feel the warmth of Li Jinglong's palm against his own.

"Sit."

Hongjun did, then froze when he realized he'd sat atop what seemed to be a coffin.

"This is Duke Di's cenotaph. There's no body in it," Li Jinglong explained quietly.

Only then did Hongjun relax. Li Jinglong listened carefully. This far underground, everything was hushed; he felt like he could hear the beat of their hearts in the silence. It was colder underground as well, and Li Jinglong rubbed Hongjun's hands between his own to ward off the chill.

"How long are we staying down here?" Hongjun asked.

"Until tomorrow morning," Li Jinglong answered. "My theory is that the four yao known as Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath are each going to break into one of the imperial mausoleums…though I'm still not sure what they're after. Xie Yu himself entered the fifth mausoleum—the Zhao Mausoleum."

"But when Cheng Xiao went into the Zhao Mausoleum, Xie Yu wasn't there. Don't you think that's strange?"

"Xie Yu knew you were coming to the Zhao Mausoleum. That's why he was there, lying in wait. It's not strange—in fact, I'm certain now that it

was a trap.”

Hongjun saw where he was going at once. “So that means—”

“Shhh… Let me finish. Xie Yu sent the four cardinal vices out for a reason. If my guess is correct, he told them to break into the imperial mausoleums to look for something,” Li Jinglong said. “Huang Yong notified the Department of Exorcism after the first incident. Xie Yu found out and tried to take advantage of the situation to ambush you at the Zhao Mausoleum.”

“There’s another possibility.”

“What possibility?” Li Jinglong asked, his voice low as he wrapped an arm around Hongjun and eased him closer.

“What if Cheng Xiao *did* see Xie Yu?”

“There’s no way.” Li Jinglong was incredulous. “Cheng Xiao is human—of this I’m certain.” When Hongjun said nothing, Li Jinglong continued, “I watched a lot of these kids grow up back when I was in the Longwu Guard.”

“Mm, so the two of you have known each other quite a while,” Hongjun said casually.

“Are you jealous?” Li Jinglong’s voice was soft in the darkness, colored with laughter. Hongjun didn’t reply. “I didn’t think you liked me that much,” Li Jinglong teased. “Why don’t you get a little angrier?”

Hongjun had half a mind to smack him, but before his temper could flare, Li Jinglong said, “I really shouldn’t kiss you while you’re sitting on Duke Di’s cenotaph, but…”

In the next moment, he felt Li Jinglong’s warm lips brush lightly against his cheek. He hastily pushed him away—they couldn’t mess around

in a tomb.

“I’m sure Duke Di…mm, I’m sure he won’t castigate me for it,” Li Jinglong finished.

Hongjun knew Li Jinglong had always considered himself Di Renjie’s successor; it was a point of pride for him. But whenever he heard this man’s name, Hongjun recalled that scene from his memory. Instantly uncomfortable, he huffed out a breath.

“You don’t believe me?” Li Jinglong asked with a chuckle, misunderstanding his reaction.

“That’s not it,” Hongjun answered quickly. “Can we look around?”

“You can light a lamp,” Li Jinglong said. “I only stopped you before because I wasn’t sure if there was a yaoguai hiding in here. It looks like we’re clear, so go ahead.”

He produced the little wooden box again, and several fireflies flew out, illuminating the small chamber. The center of the space was occupied by a square ebony casket containing Di Renjie’s official’s cap and robes. Hongjun glanced around the dimly lit chamber, noting the many books and painting scrolls stored here.

“Duke Di’s final resting place is in Luoyang,” Li Jinglong said. “But Emperor Zhongzong insisted on erecting this cenotaph here in his honor.”

Hongjun pointed at the books, and Li Jinglong motioned for him to do as he pleased. Crossing one leg over the other, he said, “A lot of these are things I brought in myself during the annual imperial sacrifice. Back then, I thought about leaving the Sword of Wisdom here too.”

During his time as a commandant of the Longwu Guard, Li Jinglong had accompanied the imperial family to each of the imperial mausoleums in turn to offer sacrifice to Great Tang's imperial ancestors. When they came to the Ding Mausoleum, he had always stayed for a while by himself.

"Cheng Xiao is a distant cousin of Lian Hao, from the Imperial Court of Judicial Review," Li Jinglong said. "You met him before."

"Mm," Hongjun murmured as he perused the books lining the shelves by the fireflies' flickering glow: transcriptions of cases, large and small, that had taken place in Luoyang during the Shenlong era, when Wu Zetian was empress.

Lost in his memories, Li Jinglong said, "The imperial guard has a reserve force made up of twelve- to thirteen-year-old boys who wish to join the army. That was the path that I took as well."

Hongjun hummed.

"Every year, the commandants of the imperial guard go and take a look at the boys to recruit them into their divisions. That's how I met Cheng Xiao. He's smart as a whip, and fearless to boot…"

"Mm."

"But he's not my type."

"So what's your type, then?"

"I like the pretty, dumb ones."

Hongjun stared.

"If that's too big an ask," Li Jinglong continued, "I wouldn't mind settling for someone with average looks. But the ones that are too smart—

especially the ones who overestimate their own intelligence—they're too high-maintenance for me."

"Well, he's also very pretty," Hongjun said coolly.

"You think *he's* pretty? Have you gone blind?"

Hongjun grabbed a scroll to smack Li Jinglong on the head. Li Jinglong merely laughed and scooted over, motioning for Hongjun to sit beside him. Hongjun ignored the gesture. He turned, ready to storm out of the chamber, when Li Jinglong called out, "Don't wander around; stay in here." After a moment, he spoke again. "I really don't like the smart ones, though. Maybe because I'm very smart myself."

Sourness lapped at Hongjun's heart. "Did a lot of boys like you back when you were in the Longwu Guard?"

"You finally asked," Li Jinglong said with a smile.

"So do you like pretty—um, pretty boys or not?" Hongjun ducked his head and went back to rummaging through scrolls. Li Jinglong lifted a hand, and a firefly floated over, hovering beside Hongjun's cheek and illuminating the painting on the scroll he was holding.

"Will you be mad if I tell you the truth?"

"I won't."

"Then, yes," Li Jinglong answered honestly. "I was around thirteen when I realized I didn't like girls and only liked boys. I was probably born this way."

Hongjun thought about Qin Wu and Cheng Xiao, then recalled Li Jinglong's behavior in Pingkang Ward. Realization dawned. He was a bit

surprised at how candidly Li Jinglong admitted it—it was as if he had only now glimpsed a different side of the Li Jinglong he'd known all this time.

"But I never acted on it; nothing ever happened while I was in the Longwu Guard."

"I know, you've said." Hongjun laughed.

"You asked me before when I started liking you." After a moment of thought, Li Jinglong continued, "I think I fell for you right after we met, even though I'd only seen you a few times."

Hongjun turned to examine Li Jinglong in the dimness, a complicated knot of emotion rising in his chest.

"Come here, Hongjun," Li Jinglong said softly. "I missed you."

Hongjun stepped forward and straddled Li Jinglong's lap, gazing down at him. Li Jinglong studied his face. "When I was in the Longwu Guard, a lot of the guys gossiped about this behind my back. It ruined my reputation."

Hongjun stroked Li Jinglong's cheek, then threw his arms around his neck. Li Jinglong buried his face in his shoulder.

"Sometimes I find it odd as well," Li Jinglong continued. "What kind of person do I like, exactly? Someone like Qin Wu? Like Cheng Xiao? There are parts of both of them that feel like the person I'm looking for, but at the same time, neither is quite right. I don't really know." Hongjun's eyes went wide as Li Jinglong continued: "But then, when we met and fought in the Department of Exorcism—the light was dim, so I couldn't see you at first—but later, when I looked at you more carefully… It's strange, but I feel like it's you. You're the one I'm looking for."

Li Jinglong gazed up at Hongjun, his eyes heavy-lidded. “Your brows, your eyes—the way you look, the way you speak, and the way you’re so clueless… It makes me feel like it’s fate that I would fall madly in love with you the moment I saw you. The boys I knew in the past, they all bore a resemblance to you…but only a slight one. And if such slight resemblance was enough to move my heart, what more needs to be said of my…”

As Hongjun stared down at Li Jinglong with dazed eyes, he couldn’t help but recall those childhood memories.

Li Jinglong wrapped his arms tighter around Hongjun. Fireflies fluttered around them. By their soft glow, Li Jinglong looked as if he was gazing piously up at his own personal god.

Hongjun cupped Li Jinglong’s face in his hands. Slowly, he linked the events of the past together. Qing Xiong, or perhaps Di Renjie… Whoever it was, someone had erased Li Jinglong’s memory.

But deep in his heart, he still remembered Hongjun.

He remembered he needed to get rid of the monster within his body, so he sought out Daoist priests and tried to learn spiritual techniques; he remembered their time together, so he saw the shadow of Hongjun in the other young men he encountered.

There was no need for him to say any of this; doing so was akin to shedding his armor, leaving him bare and defenseless before Hongjun.

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“What more needs to be said of my prince?” Li Jinglong finished with a lift of his brows.

Hongjun stroked his cheek as he studied his handsome face. “Sometimes, I can’t help thinking things would be much more difficult for you if my dad really were the yao king of Chang’an.”

Li Jinglong grinned. “In that case, we would have to fight to the death—but who knows, I might let you win.”

“Well, I wouldn’t show you any mercy.”

“Naturally.” A thought occurred to Li Jinglong. “How did Xie Yu end up fighting your dad all those years ago?”

Hongjun had no idea; in fact, he knew very little about those events. “I guess the yao race split into two factions.”

“So the yao race also has internal conflicts,” Li Jinglong mused.

“Of course.”

Li Jinglong frowned in thought. Sensing that he’d been struck by some fresh inspiration, Hongjun slipped out of his lap and sat down beside him. “What are you thinking about?”

Li Jinglong turned to him. “I feel like the answer’s just out of reach. Can you repeat what you said just now?”

“If my dad really were the yao king of Chang’an?”

“No, the next part.”

“The yao race split into two factions?” Hongjun tried again.

An idea flashed through Li Jinglong’s mind. “Do you remember what Yongsi said about the intel he gathered from the macaque?”

“He said Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath are four yaoguai working for Xie Yu.”

“What do they do again?” Li Jinglong was breathing quicker now; he felt like he was half a step away from the truth.

“They’re responsible for protecting another demon?” Hongjun said. “Xie Yu transformed his three immortal souls into demon seeds to replace the true demon seed of Mara, which he failed to find…”

“One was in Lu Xu,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun nodded. “But we destroyed it.”

“The second must be in Xie Yu. But the location of the last one is still unknown,” Li Jinglong said, nearly trembling with excitement. “The snake you saw in the Zhao Mausoleum—do you think it was the second or third?”

Hongjun scratched his head; he didn’t know. Li Jinglong forged ahead. “Heart demons require a host. Is it possible that the hosts of two of Xie Yu’s heart demons might end up on opposing sides?”

“Huh?” The idea seemed absurd. Hongjun tried to follow the thread of his logic. If the yao race could split into two factions, then perhaps it stood to reason that Xie Yu’s heart demons could do the same. For instance, Xie Yu had transformed one of his immortal souls into a heart demon and planted it in Lu Xu, causing Lu Xu to descend into demonhood. But the dark Lu Xu was still Lu Xu; he hadn’t become Xie Yu just because he housed one of his souls.

In other words, somewhere out there in the Divine Land, there was another host who housed a demon seed, yet possessed their own

consciousness, independent of Xie Yu. The only question was whether they were human or yao.

“So we’ve gone from one enemy to two?” Hongjun asked.

“Unless they’re fighting among themselves,” Li Jinglong said.

“But that couldn’t really happen…could it?” Hongjun mumbled. “He…”

“Xie Yu refined two of his immortal souls into heart demon seeds, then sought out hosts for those seeds,” Li Jinglong said. “The seed didn’t devour Lu Xu’s soul. The hosts still have their own will, correct?”

Hongjun nodded. Li Jinglong continued, “Then let’s say I was the host. Instead of doing what Xie Yu wants, I might want to turn the tables and devour him, or break free of his control.”

“If I were Xie Yu, I wouldn’t tell you the truth,” Hongjun countered.

“Then maybe it wouldn’t hurt for us to tell them.”

While Hongjun silently considered this, Li Jinglong quickly gathered the fireflies back into the box, then cupped a hand over Hongjun’s mouth. Arm still wrapped around his waist, he got up and pulled him into a corner.

A gust of wind funneled into the mausoleum like a gathering of ghosts, rustling the books on the shelf. Eerie blue light flared; in an instant, the tomb transformed into a spectral scene, as if all the souls of the dead had returned. Spiritual energy wove back and forth across the breadth of the Ding Mausoleum, accompanied by a man’s strangely hoarse laughter. Hongjun’s eyes widened at the sound, a chill running down his spine.

The unnatural wind subsided with a final moan. Hongjun gripped Li Jinglong’s fingers with one hand and clutched a throwing knife in the other as

Li Jinglong quietly led them, hunched over, from their corner. The blue light still twisted and jumped through the imperial mausoleum like a winding river. Li Jinglong gestured for Hongjun to duck, avoiding the stream of light. They hid themselves behind a sancai-glazed statue the size of a grown man and watched as a figure entered the tomb with a limping gait.

From their vantage, they could only see the yaoguai's shadow, which resembled a human walking with a pair of crutches. It silently lumbered its way to higher ground, where it was joined by a second figure. The pair seemed to be communicating using human speech interspersed with inscrutable, guttural sounds.

"Where are the…mentioned?" one asked. "The door of the mausoleum…opened yet."

"Quick," the other yaoguai responded. "Stop…time…"

The first yaoguai let out a harsh peal of laughter. There was a loud rumble as the door to Li Xian's burial chamber opened.

Hongjun peeked out and felt himself immediately yanked back. He flapped a hand at Li Jinglong, indicating that the two yaoguai had gone inside. Mollified, Li Jinglong peeked out as well.

The central vault was located on a higher level than the one they stood on. A blast of purple-black light burst from the chamber's entrance, accompanied by the voices of countless individuals singing and conversing, and a clinking cascade of copper coins.

With one finger, Li Jinglong sketched a word on the back of Hongjun's hand: *Greed*.

Hongjun’s eyes widened. The purple-black light faded, and there was a sudden clamor from inside.

What are they doing?! Hongjun was about to explode from curiosity, but Li Jinglong had a firm grip on his hand; there was no way he could run out and take a look.

The noise died down as abruptly as it’d started.

“I…Xie Yu…knows.”

“Even if he…what can he do? Besides…our plan…don’t kill…”

“…easy for you to say.”

“They don’t know…”

“Speaking of, it’s strange…ambush.”

“…at the Qiao Mausoleum…”

The pair of shadows hobbled back out on their crutches.

Their voices were faint and indistinct, but Li Jinglong listened intently until the yaoguai were safely out of the mausoleum. The interlude had been brief; in less time than it took to finish a cup of tea, the tomb settled back into silence.

“What are they?” Hongjun wondered, perplexed.

Li Jinglong raised a hand for quiet as he mulled over what had just happened.

“‘Where are the *exorcists*’…or maybe ‘*guards*…that Xie Yu mentioned’?” Li Jinglong repeated from memory. “‘The door to the mausoleum hasn’t been opened yet.’ Then, the second one told the first one to hurry up: ‘Stop wasting time.’”

With Li Jinglong's recitation jogging his memory, Hongjun began to piece together the guttural syllables as well: "'I hate that Xie Yu knows'?"

"'I suspect Xie Yu already knows,'" Li Jinglong suggested. "'Even if he knows, what can he do? Besides, he doesn't know about our plan. Everything will be fine so long as we don't kill anyone.' 'That's easy for you to say.' 'They don't know the details of our plan.' 'Speaking of, it's strange there's no ambush.' 'It's probably at the Qiao Mausoleum.'"

Li Jinglong and Hongjun traded a glance. "They're not working with Xie Yu!" Hongjun whispered.

"What yaoguai speak like this? Fish? Birds?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun frowned, then shook his head. "It seemed like they were using crutches—what could they be?"

Hongjun began to straighten up, but Li Jinglong pushed him back down. They stayed hidden until the carp yao called into the darkness, "Hongjun?"

Only then did Hongjun and Li Jinglong creep out from the mausoleum. The moon had reached its zenith. Li Jinglong scanned their surroundings. At least tonight, there were no casualties. Wasting no time, he set off down the mountain with Hongjun in tow.

Beneath the pale moonlight, a broken-antlered white deer glowed gently as it bounded over the meadow. Lu Xu met Hongjun and Li Jinglong at the foot of the mountain.

"We engaged the enemy in a fight at the Xian Mausoleum," he said. "The big wolf was hurt, so I sent him back to Chang'an."

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Chapter 87:
The Crown Prince's Late-Night Visit

CLOUDS SWALLOWED the moon as Li Jinglong rushed into the dimly lit Department of Exorcism. Mergen stood shirtless in the courtyard, sporting a set of nasty claw marks on his left arm. After confirming that there was no poison in the wounds, Hongjun thanked the heavens and hurried off to prepare medicine.

"I told you to keep your distance," Mergen snapped at Lu Xu. "Why do you refuse to—"

"That bastard would never have had a chance to attack us if you weren't so reckless!" Lu Xu shot back, plainly furious.

"If you had listened to me, would he have gotten away?!"

"Fine! Next time, go by yourself!"

"Stop fighting." Li Jinglong's head was spinning. They had finally gotten their hands on a real clue, only to find that Mergen and Lu Xu had alerted the yaoguai in the mausoleum. And now the two were arguing in the middle of the courtyard with no signs of stopping.

Just as Hongjun stepped in, trying to soothe Lu Xu and pull him away, Mergen exploded. "Lu Xu! I always spoil you. I let you do whatever you like—when have I ever breathed a word of complaint? But this was a mission for the Department of Exorcism, do you understand?!"

"Did you ever ask me for my opinion during the mission?!" Lu Xu gave no quarter as he shouted back, "Did you discuss it with me before

charging in?!”

Incredibly, the fight only seemed to escalate.

“Shut up, both of you!” Li Jinglong barked, putting an end to their squabbling.

Hongjun dug through his medicinal ingredients as he listened to Lu Xu’s account and gained a rough idea of what had happened. It seemed that, while at the Xian Mausoleum, Lu Xu and Mergen had run into the same type of yaoguai he and Li Jinglong had encountered in the Ding Mausoleum. To protect Lu Xu, Mergen had ordered him to stay put while he rushed into the burial chamber, where he was attacked by the yaoguai, which transformed into a mass of demonic energy in the darkness. Worried for Mergen’s safety, Lu Xu had cast a spiritual technique to drive it back. What he hadn’t known was that Mergen had planned to use himself as bait to lure the yaoguai over to Lu Xu, and was prepared to suffer some minor injuries.

The moment Lu Xu attacked, the yao realized the danger and seized the opportunity to escape—hence their current argument. Mergen was furious with Lu Xu for failing to follow his orders, while Lu Xu was equally incensed to have been kept in the dark.

Hongjun finished preparing the medicine, then turned to Lu Xu. “All right, all right, calm down.”

“I am *never* working with him again,” Lu Xu fumed.

Torn between laughter and tears, Hongjun was about to console him when Ashina Adarvan, A-Tai, and Qiu Yongsi returned as well.

“Since everyone’s here,” Li Jinglong called out, “meeting—now.”

Mergen was still shirtless, baring the wounds on his shoulders and back. Hongjun handed the medicine to Lu Xu, who refused to take it, shrinking away when Hongjun pressed it into his hand. He wouldn't so much as look at Mergen.

Li Jinglong frowned. "Lu Xu! That's enough!"

Lu Xu straightened up at once in response to Li Jinglong's rebuke. This was the first time Hongjun had ever seen Li Jinglong lose his temper at one of them, and the main hall immediately plunged into a pin-drop silence.

Since the Department of Exorcism's re-establishment, Li Jinglong had rarely reprimanded his subordinates. Everyone waited for the inevitable tongue-lashing, but he merely said, "Our mission's success depends on all of us working together and trusting each other. We've alerted the enemy, but what's done is done. What use is there in arguing about whose fault it was?"

The silence stretched uncomfortably. Finally, Li Jinglong said, "Let's verify the information we've gathered. How did the other teams do at their mausoleums?"

The atmosphere eased slightly. "We lost our target," A-Tai answered.

A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan had waited inside the Qiao Mausoleum for half the night and encountered the same mysterious yaoguai as the other two teams. Qiu Yongsi, meanwhile, had remained outside as support to keep him from ruining their plans when he inevitably screamed in fright. According to the evidence they had gathered so far, two yaoguai had appeared at the Ding Mausoleum; one at the Qiao Mausoleum; one at the Qian Mausoleum; one at the Zhao Mausoleum; and one at the Xian Mausoleum.

"The numbers don't match," Li Jinglong muttered.

“Maybe one of the yaoguai we saw at the Ding Mausoleum tonight showed up at the Qian Mausoleum last night?” Hongjun suggested. “Maybe it was just accompanying another one tonight.”

“Even so, the numbers are still wrong,” Qiu Yongsi said. “There are too many.”

“In any case, the Zhao Mausoleum was the first to be breached,” Li Jinglong said.

After a moment of thought, he spread out a map and drew a rough sketch of the five peaks that held the mausoleums with a piece of charcoal. “Let’s assume there’s a large number of these yao. The first entered the Zhao Mausoleum on the thirteenth. By the time the case was delivered to the Department of Exorcism, it was already the seventeenth. That’s four days after the incident. But when Hongjun and Lu Xu entered the Zhao Mausoleum, they ran into Xie Yu.”

“It was a trap,” Lu Xu interjected. “He was waiting for us.”

“It was a trap,” Li Jinglong agreed, “but perhaps not for the two of you.”

Mergen started in surprise.

“I was struck by a thought tonight,” Li Jinglong continued. “Consider: What if Xie Yu and these four yaoguai are not allies working together, but enemies from opposing factions?”

“Then everything would make sense,” Qiu Yongsi murmured. “Xie Yu wasn’t waiting for Hongjun, he was waiting for the yaoguai that slaughtered the guards at the Zhao Mausoleum to return.”

Li Jinglong hummed approvingly. The truth, previously wreathed in fog, seemed to slowly emerge.

“So that’s how it is,” Mergen said, brow furrowed. “A yao entered the Zhao Mausoleum first, killing the guards. Xie Yu hurried over… Perhaps there’s something in each of the imperial mausoleums that they want. Based on what we saw tonight, it must be located inside the burial chamber. That first yao that entered the Zhao Mausoleum—we don’t know whether it found what it was looking for or failed in its mission.”

“I’m guessing it failed,” Li Jinglong said. “That’s why Xie Yu went in. Maybe our previous assumptions were all wrong. Xie Yu never intended to lure Hongjun and Lu Xu into the Zhao Mausoleum; it really was just a coincidence.”

“That’s right!” A-Tai drew a circle around the five imperial mausoleums. “As things stand, Xie Yu has no other yao at his disposal, right? There’s no way for him to guard five mausoleums. That’s why he chose to stay in the Zhao Mausoleum and wait for the other yaoguai to return.”

“In the meantime, the yaoguai seized the chance to check the four remaining mausoleums,” Qiu Yongsi said. “They knew Xie Yu was guarding the Zhao Mausoleum on the night of the seventeenth, so they sent one of their number to the Qian Mausoleum and found what they were looking for.”

The timeline of events now became clear: On the night of the seventeenth, Xie Yu had gone to the Zhao Mausoleum to lie in wait, where he had run into Hongjun and Lu Xu in the course of their investigation. That same night, the yaoguai they were seeking avoided Xie Yu and entered the Qian Mausoleum. Then, the following night—that was, tonight—one of the yaoguai that had broken into the Qian Mausoleum entered the Ding

Mausoleum with its cohort, while the remaining two had gone to the Qiao and Xian Mausoleums respectively.

As Hongjun finished applying medicine to Mergen's wounds, he couldn't help but marvel at everyone's deductions. To think they would be able to piece together so many scraps of evidence, and so quickly!

"There's no need for us to return to these four," Li Jinglong said, crossing out the Ding, Qiao, Qian, and Xian Mausoleums. "Chances are, they've already taken whatever it is they're looking for. Tonight, they'll probably—"

"Is the Marquis of Yardang here?" a voice called from outside.

Everyone jumped. It was just past midnight, and the visitor's voice was crystal clear in the quiet night. The main gate of the Department of Exorcism was sealed with a spiritual array, so any guests had to wait outside to be let in.

Li Jinglong started in shock as he recognized the voice and immediately got to his feet.

"I need to speak with you," the man outside called. This time, Hongjun recognized the voice too—it was the crown prince, Li Heng.

Li Jinglong motioned for everyone to stay where they were and hurried out to greet him.

"Let's go to the study," Mergen suggested.

Mergen's arm wasn't seriously injured, so the group swiftly removed to the study, and Li Jinglong ushered the crown prince into the main hall. "Has Your Highness heard, as well?"

Li Heng swept his eyes over the teacup-strewn table and nodded. “Is it a true haunting?”

Li Jinglong hadn’t expected the crown prince to be so direct. “The investigation is ongoing,” he replied.

“Marquis,” Li Heng said grimly. His expression underwent a subtle shift. “My father placed you under my command. I gave you money when you requested funding, made you a marquis when you asked for a title, and I have continued to defend you in the imperial court. Why, then, are you so parsimonious with information? Have I offended you in some way?”

Li Jinglong frowned. “Your Highness, it is a long-held habit of mine to avoid making any public statements on open cases. No matter who is doing the asking or how they pose their questions, I cannot give a conclusive answer. It would be the same even if His Majesty himself asked. That said, if you have any orders to give, I am at your command, and will do my best to execute them.”

Evidently, Li Heng was still resentful over what had transpired the day Li Jinglong and Hongjun returned to Chang’an. He knew that although Li Jinglong was usually affable, he was also extremely stubborn. Nothing could move him when he decided to dig in his heels.

Li Heng regarded Li Jinglong in silence, as if trying to ascertain his intentions. Likewise, Li Jinglong made no sound, his mind roiling with countless thoughts.

This was the second extremely powerful person to visit the Department of Exorcism in recent days. What would move Li Heng to come in the middle of the night, unaccompanied by any of his attendants? An inkling of a problem—a particularly thorny one—unfurled in Li Jinglong’s mind.

Li Heng's next statement confirmed his suspicions: "Regardless of whether you believe in gods and ghosts, I do. There are certain topics that are forbidden to a court official or an imperial scion, but may be broached by an ancestor speaking from beyond the grave—is this not so, Li Jinglong?"

Startled, Li Jinglong lowered his voice. "Your Highness, what makes you say this?"

In the brightly lit study, everyone was busy flipping through case files.

"What could possibly be hidden inside the imperial mausoleums?" Mergen wondered aloud.

"It must be some sort of burial good present in all of the imperial mausoleums," Qiu Yongsi said thoughtfully. "Probably not a spiritual device, but something the yaoguai need."

Hongjun considered this briefly. "Do the burial chambers contain anything else besides the coffin?"

Ashina Adarvan shook his head. "The burial goods are all arranged outside; there's nothing else in the burial chamber."

"Did they open any of the coffins?" Lu Xu asked abruptly.

Ashina Adarvan and A-Tai had tailed the yaoguai out of the Qiao Mausoleum, but had soon lost the creature in the pitch-dark night. They hadn't gone back to the mausoleum after.

"We ought to go back and take a look," Mergen said. "The chief thinks so too."

As they spoke, they heard Li Jinglong escorting Li Heng out to the courtyard. Hongjun and the gang watched the pair from across the winding

corridor. Li Heng's visit had been brief, but from his and Li Jinglong's expressions, it seemed their conversation had ended poorly.

"You are standing guard over the empire of Great Tang," Li Heng said firmly.

"The results of the investigation are what they are," Li Jinglong responded. "All things must bow to the truth. If these incidents are really as Your Highness believes, I swear I will do my utmost to avoid disturbing the spirits of our nation's former rulers."

Li Heng scoffed, striding out the gate with a cool flick of his sleeves.

Li Jinglong, however, remained agitated in the extreme. He glanced at the others. "Thank you all for your hard work. Everyone, please accompany me to the Zhao Mausoleum one last time. Lu… Hongjun, you and Mergen stay here and keep an eye on things."

These orders were within everyone's expectations. Although they had been busy all night, they weren't tired in the least. They mounted their horses and set out, leaving Hongjun and Mergen alone at headquarters.

Completely spent, Mergen sat in the courtyard with his head bowed, sorting through his arrows in silence as Hongjun watched. After a time, Mergen glanced up at him with a tightly furrowed brow.

"Look, Chang'an's so beautiful tonight," Hongjun said.

"Like hell it's beautiful!" Mergen hurled the arrows to the ground. His face twisted as Hongjun began to laugh. "I'm going to go dig up all these trees I planted," he declared.

"Wait!" Hongjun protested. "Are you really that mad? Ay, you know, Lu Xu's actually pretty easy to please."

“Well, I don’t want to please him anymore.” Mergen recovered his arrows, paced a few circles around the courtyard, then sat back down in a huff. “After these past few days, I’ve had enough. No matter what I do, the little bastard doesn’t care. If it’s not a grunt of acknowledgment, it’s a tepid ‘thanks’—you know what I mean? This feeling is just…”

Settling down beneath the eaves of the open-air corridor, Hongjun looked at Mergen in confusion. After stewing a few more minutes, Mergen said, “I gave him my heart on a silver platter, and he threw it back in my face!”

Hongjun burst into uproarious laughter as Mergen muttered sullenly, “You tell me then, what have I done wrong?”

Hongjun took out his balled-up underpants, then, as an afterthought, fetched Li Jinglong’s as well. He settled down beside the well to wash the soiled clothing. “I think he likes you, but you don’t really like him. If anything, I actually find Lu Xu quite pitiful.”

Mergen stared at him in surprise.

After scrubbing for a while with his head bent, Hongjun looked up. “Am I wrong?”

Mergen sank into a deep silence. When he spoke again, he sounded lost. “I don’t know. I…I have no idea what I’d do if Lu Xu and I were together. I can’t imagine what our future would be like. What about you? How do you feel about the chief?”

Hongjun said without thinking, “I just…want to be with him all the time. I want to hug him and stay by his side and talk to him.”

He’d always felt Mergen’s feelings for Lu Xu were more obligation than anything else—wanting to be together merely for the sake of it. When he had asked Li Jinglong about it, Li Jinglong had cautioned him not to interfere. These things, he said, couldn’t be forced.

“Even if you can’t become lovers, you can still be friends,” Hongjun pointed out. “Mergen, you’ve been acting weird ever since you met Lu Xu.”

“How can I not act weird?” Mergen asked, morose. “You all just brush my questions aside. I have no idea what to do!”

As a young man well past marriageable age, and who had quite evidently never shared anything more intimate than a hug with anyone—man or woman—before, the appearance of Lu Xu had come as a complete shock to him. This revelation had turned Mergen’s world upside down. He had finally lost his cool tonight.

“I asked Ashina Adarvan about it, but all he did was teach me a bunch of stupid stuff… Do you know what he told me?”

Hongjun watched Mergen as he washed Li Jinglong’s underpants, which still smelled faintly musky from the other night. Once started, Mergen seemed unable to stop, and continued his vivid oversharing.

“He told me to stop worrying about what Lu Xu might say and just fuck him first.”

“That’s awful!” Hongjun exclaimed.

Mergen sighed. “That’s not even the awful part…”

What’s that supposed to mean? Hongjun wondered grumpily, but Mergen continued, “The problem is, I can’t get hard!”

Hongjun immediately felt awkward. Indeed, when he thought of Li Jinglong, he did seem to just naturally react. “But with girls, can you…you know?”

“I can when they’re close to me.”

Hongjun suddenly realized there existed a very serious problem: Mergen truly wasn’t attracted to men. The whole time they’d been talking, it had never occurred to him that this could be an issue in relationships between men and men, or men and women. But if Mergen said he felt no desire for Lu Xu, then it must be true.

“So I said, ‘What if I can’t get it up?’ and Ashina Adarvan told me to strip naked, put on a blindfold and tie myself up, kneel on the bed, and—allow Lu Xu to have his way with me. He said I would definitely get it up then…”

As soon as Mergen said it, Hongjun’s mind filled with images of Li Jinglong in a similar state, and he couldn’t help but get hard himself. “Let’s stop here for today,” he said. “I’m sleepy—I’m going to bed.”

Mergen had no choice but to drop the subject. After struggling with himself for a moment, he said, “You’re right. We should start by being friends.”

He sighed, staring back down at his arrows in a daze.

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Chapter 88:
Manifestations from the Grave

IT WAS A LONG RIDE out to the Zhao Mausoleum—when Hongjun and Lu Xu had gone the first time, they had spent over an hour on travel alone. When dawn broke, Li Jinglong still hadn't returned. Hongjun tossed and turned in his bed, plagued by a strange and confusing dream. It wasn't until the sun had climbed high in the sky that he was awakened by the sound of rapid hoofbeats and shouts coming from the back alley.

He stepped out of his room to find Mergen sitting before a mirror with his robes shrugged off one shoulder, reapplying medicine to the claw marks on his arm. Noting Hongjun's confused expression, he said, "Sounds like some sort of royal inspection tour. Shall we go take a look?"

The sky was overcast today, yet practically the entire city seemed to be out on the streets. Nearly all the imperial princes had turned out, though there was no sign of Li Longji or Noble Consort Yang. Rows of imperial guards solemnly flanked the streets, preventing commoners from blocking the way as Li Heng galloped past astride a piebald horse with a crenelated mane, the rest of the imperial princes kicking up dust behind him.

Mergen and Hongjun dismounted and followed the procession to the city gates. They were standing among the curious onlookers when they spotted someone waving to them in the distance. Squinting, Hongjun recognized Li Jinglong's elder cousin, Feng Changqing.

The pair hurried over to greet him. Upon learning that Li Jinglong had yet to return from his work on a case outside the city, Feng Changqing invited

them to stand with him to watch the procession.

A man beside Feng Changqing nodded in greeting. He seemed familiar, though for a moment, Hongjun couldn't quite put a name to his face. The man smiled. "We met that night in Pingkang Ward, remember?"

"Li Guinian!" Mergen exclaimed as the memory surfaced.

The famed pipa player was elegantly dressed. He was middle-aged, perhaps a bit younger than Feng Changqing. Li Guinian seemed to be in a sunny mood, but Feng Changqing said coldly, "You boys were fooling around in Pingkang Ward again!"

"They're young," Li Guinian said. "It's understandable."

"What's going on?" Hongjun asked, peering toward the gates.

"Ya Rox-er came back, just as expected," Li Guinian explained.

From outside the city, there came the crash of a gong followed by the blare of bugle horns. The crowd parted for a massive procession. Two columns of extravagantly armored guards passed through the gates to take their places along both sides of the road.

Feng Changqing scoffed. "Such a great fuss."

"Chancellor Yang bet he wouldn't come," Li Guinian said with a small smile. "But since he has, of course he wants to make a grand entrance."

Feng Changqing coughed, warning Li Guinian to hold his tongue; they were, after all, in the presence of two members of the Department of Exorcism.

"Who's Ya Rox-er?" Hongjun asked.

"Ya Rox-er is Ya Roxshan," Li Guinian said placidly. "Roxshan—that's Sogdian for Lushan—is the name of the Zoroastrian god of light."

Mergen glanced at Li Guinian, sensing something strange about these words, but Li Guinian merely smiled.

The gong crashed three times, and a vanguard bearing ceremonial weaponry entered. Unlike the black, red, and gray armor worn by the imperial guard, this unit's armor was constructed of brown and black leather and steel plates. Following the soldiers was a massive sedan chair carried by no less than sixteen men, upon which sat a prodigiously large man.

In all his years, Hongjun had never seen a man of such size before; he exclaimed in astonishment. The people cheered, welcoming this larger-than-life figure into the city. Feng Changqing said, "An Lushan's gotten fatter."

"Why is he so…so…" Mergen struggled for a time, but couldn't find an adequate descriptor.

An Lushan—Hongjun thought he recognized this name, though he couldn't recall where he'd heard it. Li Guinian explained that not only was this man the military governor of Hedong and Fanyang—and thus the most powerful military official of Great Tang—but he was also Yang Yuhuan's godson.

Until this moment, Hongjun had considered Li Jinglong quite tall, and deemed the ghost king unusually burly. The sight of An Lushan completely shattered his perception of humans. Only one question echoed through his mind: *What on earth did this man eat to grow to such a size?*

An Lushan was sitting, yet even in this position, Hongjun could see that his legs were as sturdy as an elephant's. Sheathed in his red sleeves, the considerable bulk of his arms resembled red-lacquered pillars, and his body was wide as the arched door of a fortress. Atop his thick neck sat a head as large and round as a water tank, and his fierce features were dotted with

cinnabar, indigo, and other dyes. The longevity lock he wore on a chain around his neck trembled with each heave of his great chest; the bumpy journey had apparently left him gasping for breath.

Upon seeing the imperial princes, An Lushan let out a booming laugh. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble, coming all this way to welcome me,” he said in an unexpectedly lively voice.

“Father awaits you in the palace,” Li Heng replied. “May I suggest you meet with him first?”

“All right, all right!” An Lushan said. He waved magnanimously at the spectators flanking the road as his sedan bearers conveyed him down Imperial Street. Four heavyset warriors followed in his wake, casting money into the crowd with a flurry of bright clinks. Behind them, more guards tossed baskets full of cash toward the commoners lining both sides of the road.

The streets filled with the ringing of coins, and the people cheered. Hundreds of square-holed bronze coins glinted as they rolled across the ground, nearly inciting a brawl. The imperial guard shouted for the crowd to stop pushing as they struggled to maintain order, and Feng Changqing and Li Guinian were nearly shoved into the path of the procession.

Hongjun was about to cry out when a steadying arm looped around his waist before swiftly letting go again. Li Jinglong had materialized from who knew where, covered in the dust of the road. Together, they gazed down Imperial Street, where the cheering crowd of common folk squeezed together in a teeming mass of bodies.

Beckoning Hongjun and Mergen to follow, Li Jinglong led them after An Lushan with quick strides. Hongjun glanced back and was surprised to

see A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, and the others had all arrived as well. Qiu Yongsi, towering over the crowd, stared after the convoy, his brow knit in a deep frown, before casting a spiritual technique with a twist of his fingers.

The last of the four burly warriors turned back, eyes searching the crowd.

Cursing under his breath, Li Jinglong gestured sharply at Qiu Yongsi, who promptly feigned bending down to retrieve a coin as the warrior turned to face the front once more. Everyone froze in place, no longer daring to follow the procession. Hongjun stood flabbergasted. By the time he turned to speak to Li Jinglong, the convoy was already vanishing into the distance.

After going all night without sleep, Li Jinglong was clearly on edge. With a wave of the hand, he ordered everyone back to headquarters.

A short time later, the group filed into the study of the Department of Exorcism. Before Hongjun could ask, Li Jinglong opened his hands, showing empty palms. “There was nothing there.”

“Could those four warriors accompanying An Lushan be the four yaoguai?” Mergen asked.

Li Jinglong took a seat behind his desk, arms crossed in thoughtful silence.

“They took off northeast last night,” Lu Xu told Hongjun. “That’s the direction An Lushan came from today.”

“Can we really assume the four yaoguai are with An Lushan based on that alone?” Hongjun asked.

“It’s just a guess,” A-Tai said. “But the timing of the yaoguai’s appearance is suspicious. If the break-ins at the imperial mausoleums

happened after An Lushan returned to Chang'an, there would be a greater chance of him being implicated in this case."

"Mm." Mergen nodded. "So instead, maybe An Lushan sent the yaoguai ahead and entered the capital only after the attacks, leaving his army waiting outside Chang'an while he coordinates with the four yao—that would make a lot of sense."

"Not necessarily," Ashina Adarvan interjected. "What if that fatty doesn't know anything about the yaoguai hanging around him?"

Qiu Yongsi was last to hurry into the study. "I tried testing the waters just now. Sure enough, they took the bait," he chuckled, shutting the door behind him.

As it turned out, Qiu Yongsi had deliberately used a spiritual technique when An Lushan had passed close to them in the crowd. The power from his technique had immediately alerted the last of the four warriors in the convoy.

"Did you get a good look at his face?" Mergen asked.

Qiu Yongsi shrugged, spreading his hands. "More like he got a good look at mine."

Everyone clapped a hand to their forehead.

"What if that warrior is just a human who knows how to use spiritual techniques? We can't rule it out," Lu Xu put in.

"I'm more inclined to believe he's a yaoguai," Qiu Yongsi said. "There are many schools of spiritual cultivation in the human realm, but those who engage in those practices carry an air of righteousness. That bastard gave off an unmistakably malevolent aura when he glanced at me."

Hongjun and Li Jinglong had been standing closest to the four warriors at the time. Thinking back, Hongjun recalled that all four men were heavily built, with long arms and legs. Even after discussing at length, there was nothing that truly linked the warriors to the black yaoguai they'd spotted in the imperial mausoleums. Nevertheless, Hongjun found them somehow strangely similar.

"I think… Chief?" Seeing Li Jinglong with his head lowered, Hongjun at first assumed he was deep in thought—only to realize he had nodded off.

Everyone was exhausted following the previous day's adventures. After a brief silence, the meeting dispersed.

Hongjun came around the desk to where Li Jinglong was sitting. Having grown up scaling mountains, he possessed considerable physical strength; a burden of one to two hundred pounds was nothing to him. He scooped Li Jinglong up in his arms and carried him to his room.

The members of the Department of Exorcism returned once again to their inverted schedule of sleeping by day and working by night. It was a peaceful spring day, with only the intermittent trills of birdsong breaking the silence. Hongjun stretched out beside the slumbering Li Jinglong, who instinctively reached out and pulled him close.

As the sun slanted toward the west, Li Longji was taking his usual midday nap in Xingqing Palace. His audience with An Lushan earlier had drained him. The hoary Son of Heaven had woken early to cover the age spots on his face with powder and drunk a bowl of ginseng soup to invigorate himself for the meeting. That afternoon, after addressing the false allegations of plotting a rebellion, Li Longji had asked Yang Yuhuan to step in to pacify

her godson An Lushan, then returned to his sleeping quarters for some well-earned rest.

Within the next two months, a number of frontier generals would be returning to Chang'an for the noble consort's birthday. In ten days, Guo Ziyi would be arriving, and in another month, they could expect Geshu Han and Gao Xianzhi, among others. No doubt each military official he met with would be running their own calculations upon seeing how gray their sovereign's hair had become.

All men grew old. Li Longji closed his eyes and sighed; it wasn't the passage of time he feared, but rather the many changes that accompanied it. Perhaps it was because he had just met with An Lushan—the military governor's antipathy toward Yang Guozhong had made him realize once again that the day he died, the Yang family would face enemies on all sides. When the time came for him to depart this world, he would no longer be able to protect Yang Yuhuan. A wave of sorrow rose in his heart.

A gust of chill wind drifted past. Li Longji's tangled thoughts scattered as a voice spoke directly in his ear: "It's time to wake up."

"Who's there?!" Badly startled, Li Longji lurched upright. Yet when he saw the speaker, his terror compounded.

A woman, sumptuously dressed in the robes of an emperor, strode gracefully down the corridor toward him, the long fall of her unbound hair fluttering in the wind. "Li Longji!" she said, her voice stern.

Li Longji cried out, his soul nearly fleeing his body from fright. Fighting for calm, he took a closer look and was shocked to see that it was Wu Zhao, his paternal grandmother—and the person he'd feared most in his life. He still remembered meeting her as a youth. The sight of her enfeebled

body and the aura of senescence that surrounded her in her final days had left him permanently in terror of death.

Wu Zhao narrowed her eyes and slowly spread her arms. “Our nation of Great Tang is blessed with the favor of the heavens. It is only right that we strengthen our armies toward the purpose of establishing an empire that will stand for millennia.”

“Yes…yes.” Li Longji had gone deathly pale. As the emperor, he couldn’t very well kneel, but he had no idea what else to do.

“Yet Your Majesty believes slanderous lies and allows that wicked enchantress to blight our nation… How does such an unfilial descendant dare show his face before the ancestors of Great Tang?! Li Longji! On your knees!”

Wu Zhao had been dead for decades, yet her authority remained as absolute as in life. A single barked order, and Li Longji fell to his knees, his entire body shaking like a leaf.

“Repent!” With that final castigation, Wu Zhao splintered into countless fluttering lights, which streamed out of the courtyard and disappeared.

Stricken, Li Longji rose shakily to his feet, as if in a dream.

That evening, Li Longji, his eyes still shaded with fear, sat in silence with Yang Guozhong, Gao Lishi, and Li Heng in the imperial study.

A eunuch appeared in the entryway. “Li Jinglong, the chief of the Department of Exorcism and Marquis of Yardang, is here to speak with Your Majesty.”

“Send him in,” Li Longji said coolly.

Li Jinglong had only just woken from his slumber when he was summoned to Xingqing Palace, and was still a bit befuddled from sleep.

Unable to bear another moment of suspense, Li Longji barked, “Li Jinglong! Explain yourself! What happened in the imperial mausoleums?!”

Li Jinglong cursed softly to himself—but it wouldn’t do to ask questions now. “The bodies of our nation’s former emperors remain perfectly intact—”

“We are asking,” Li Longji began, his voice terribly cold, “*why* there have been hauntings in the imperial mausoleums!”

Evidently, he had been fully informed by Yang Guozhong. Sensing something was amiss, Li Jinglong studied Li Longji. Realization flickered across his face. “Your Majesty, did something strange happen?”

Perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t asked. Li Longji promptly exploded.

“Li Jinglong!” he roared. “You dare defy us?!”

Naturally, Li Jinglong dared not. He promptly dropped to one knee and cupped his hands. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. This subject only wishes to know whether some new event has occurred within the palace.”

“We saw the ghost of a late emperor,” Li Longji said in a trembling voice. “We saw it with our own eyes; it was not a dream.”

Li Jinglong’s head shot up in shock. *So that’s what it is*, he thought to himself. *This is what he was after!*

“On the night of the thirteenth,” Li Jinglong began, “the Imperial Court of Judicial Review received a case.”

He quickly summarized the facts of the case and their ensuing investigation as objectively as possible. Li Longji was no stranger to scoldings; his ministers often risked his anger to make their remonstrations. But he had a guilty conscience in this matter, and his terror had peaked with Wu Zhao's ghostly appearance. He had been nearly out of his mind with fright since waking from his nap. After listening to Li Jinglong's detailed explanation, he asked, "Our primary concern is the creature we saw today—tell us, was it a ghost or a yaoguai?"

Before Li Jinglong could speak, Yang Guozhong cut in in a chilly voice. "Marquis, I'd advise you to think carefully before you answer."

Li Jinglong glanced at Yang Guozhong. If he said a yao had appeared before Li Longji and scared him witless, he would be setting himself up for accusations of dereliction of duty. Yet if he said it was a ghost, he would be shifting the blame. The second scenario was precisely what Li Heng wanted—but it would mean lying about the facts and deceiving his sovereign, a capital crime.

"It was a yao," Li Jinglong said firmly. "The Department of Exorcism is currently investigating this case. My oversight has led to Your Majesty being disturbed, for which I deserve a thousand deaths."

"Could it be that someone has induced you to put on a show for us?" Li Longji asked, his voice dangerously low.

Li Jinglong turned pale. "Your Majesty! What makes you think this?! That is impossible!"

Li Heng blanched as well. Gao Lishi, who had been listening from the side, stepped forward at this point and whispered into Li Longji's ear. Only then did the emperor recover his usual dignified mien.

“The case of the imperial mausoleums shall be transferred back to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review. We shall find out the truth of this matter soon enough! For his negligence, Li Jinglong is to be detained in Xingqing Palace to await trial. Summon the members of the Department of Exorcism for questioning and take down written statements!”

“Your Majesty,” Li Jinglong interjected, “this subject has one more matter to report!”

Li Longji merely waved an exhausted hand for the guards to march Li Jinglong away. Mind racing, Li Jinglong looked back into the imperial study just in time to see Yang Guozhong shoot him an inscrutable smile before the doors slammed shut.

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Chapter 89:
Frame-up

WITHIN THE STUDY, Li Longji turned to Li Heng. “We are exhausted. You may withdraw; get some rest.”

The crown prince had no choice but to accept the dismissal, leaving Li Longji alone with Yang Guozhong and Gao Lishi.

The instant he was gone, Gao Lishi smiled ingratiatingly at the emperor. “His Highness is young yet. His actions are understandable.”

“That may be so for Heng-er,” Li Longji said, “but Li Jinglong’s actions are inexcusable. To think he had the gall to disturb the Li family’s ancestral graves for such a stunt!”

Gao Lishi instructed a guard to bring forth the witnesses, and a man soon arrived—one of the crown prince’s advisors.

“Where did you see His Highness go on the night of the eighteenth?” Gao Lishi asked.

“Reporting to Your Majesty and my lords.” Recognizing the delicacy of the situation, the man said, “That night, His Highness had his carriage prepared and visited the Department of Exorcism. This plot was conceived by several members of the imperial court, His Highness, and these exorcists.”

“What did you hear?” Li Longji was shaking from anger. “Leave nothing out; you will not be blamed for anything you say here today.”

This young strategist planted among Li Heng’s staff had evidently been bought off with a hefty sum of money by Gao Lishi. The Chief Eunuch had

instructed him on what to say in advance, and he promptly spun up an appropriate story.

As he told it, the crown prince, hoping to frighten Li Longji into ending his obsession with his beautiful consort, had availed himself of the spiritual techniques used by Li Jinglong and the Department of Exorcism to stage a supernatural hoax. After consulting with the crown prince, Li Jinglong broke into the imperial mausoleums to collect material for their ruse. With the deaths of the guards, however, the situation soon began to spin out of control. Fearing the consequences should things get truly out of hand, Li Jinglong attempted to abort their plan, but the crown prince was determined to press ahead. This was why Li Heng had gone to the Department of Exorcism last night—to convince Li Jinglong to continue.

And indeed, Li Heng did seem to have had something he wanted to say to Li Jinglong just now. Recalling this, Li Longji descended into silence.

Gao Lishi dismissed the man with a wave, then turned to Li Longji. “Your Majesty, the first time this subject heard this man’s tale, this subject thought it was complete nonsense; it didn’t seem worth reporting. For this, this subject truly deserves a thousand deaths…”

Li Longji raised a hand to silence him. It was Yang Guozhong who spoke next: “Your Majesty, there is one more witness. Shall I summon him now?”

The second witness fell to his knees the moment he arrived, kowtowing to Li Longji. “Your subject Cheng Xiao, aide of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review, pays his respects to Your Majesty.”

“Tell us. How did Li Jinglong intervene with regard to the case of the imperial mausoleums?” Yang Guozhong asked.

“He said…since the Department of Exorcism was taking over the case, they would handle the investigation from beginning to end, and that the Court of Judicial Review was not to interfere.”

“When you entered the Zhao Mausoleum to investigate, did you see a black dragon?” Yang Guozhong continued.

Li Longji frowned slightly, as if recalling something.

“I did not,” Cheng Xiao said earnestly. “Kong Hongjun may say otherwise, but I have never seen any black dragon.”

“And did you find anything else unusual inside the imperial mausoleums?” Yang Guozhong pressed.

“Responding to Your Excellency, there was nothing of note within the Qian Mausoleum—not so much as a footprint on the ground. The only unusual thing about the case is the deaths of the guards. While at the Qian Mausoleum, a fish monster under Li Jinglong’s command forced my subordinate to inhale some sort of drug. When we returned, he had forgotten everything about the incident. All of this is in the official record. I ask that Your Majesty, Your Excellency, and General Gao review it at your leisure.”

Yang Guozhong was about to dismiss the young man when Li Longji said, “We hear that you are an old acquaintance of Li Jinglong?”

As Cheng Xiao bowed once more, Li Longji asked, “What are your thoughts on this case?”

“There are no such things as gods and ghosts,” Cheng Xiao responded. “Yet since last year, there has been an undeniable increase in the number of strange incidents in Chang’an. Some people are saying that…”

Li Longji's expression turned stormy, and the atmosphere in the study immediately grew tense.

Yang Guozhong intervened. "Forget it, you may go."

"Speak," said Li Longji. "You will not be punished for speaking the truth."

"The people are saying this is surely a sign of a nation on the verge of…well…" Cheng Xiao trailed off, ducking his head even lower. "Entrusting the fate of the country to the mystical and illusory will inevitably lead to the rampant spread of rumors. Since the Department of Exorcism exists, of course the people will believe in monsters."

"Yet we have seen with our own eyes that yaoguai exist." Li Longji seemed older than ever as he sagged back against the couch. Closing his eyes, he said, "We didn't want to believe it either."

"Your Majesty, even what you see with your own eyes may not always be true," Cheng Xiao said.

Just like Wu Zhao's ghostly apparition, these words seemed designed to strike at the heart of Li Longji's worries.

"Seeing as this case was formerly under your charge, we will leave it in your hands," Li Longji said, recovering his composure. "As for Li Jinglong, the imperial mausoleums are of utmost importance, related to the sovereignty of our nation. To think he would be so brazen as to collude with…"

Given Cheng Xiao's presence, it wouldn't do for Li Longji to say *with the crown prince*. "…with others to pull such a trick," he finished. "He must be taught a lesson! For now, we shall take him into custody. But Cheng Xiao, whether it is a yao, a ghost, or an ordinary man deliberately orchestrating this

hoax to attack the noble consort, you must provide us with an explanation before the noble consort's birthday celebration."

Cheng Xiao hastily bowed, accepting his orders.

"How should the other members of the Department of Exorcism be dealt with?" Gao Lishi asked.

"Li Jinglong's subordinates are all possessed of uniquely powerful techniques," Yang Guozhong said. "In my opinion, this is what we must do…"

Back at the Department of Exorcism, everyone waited for Li Jinglong to return. Visiting the palace was a common occurrence for him; even after he'd been gone a whole afternoon and night, Hongjun and the others didn't find it unusual.

When Huang Yong arrived the next morning to summon them to the Court of Judicial Review, however, everyone exploded into outrage.

"You want written statements?" Mergen asked, utterly baffled. "But wait, where's our chief?"

"He's being detained at Xingqing Palace," Huang Yong said, mopping at his sweat with a handkerchief. "Go record your statements in writing first. To think word would get out like this—ay!"

Everyone was stunned. Realizing something had gone wrong, Hongjun wanted to set out for Xingqing Palace to find Li Jinglong immediately—and he wasn't alone. Only after Huang Yong pleaded with them using every exhortation he knew did he manage to stop the members of the Department of Exorcism from charging into the palace after their leader. He quickly laid out

the rest of the details: that the case of the imperial mausoleums had become contentious, that His Majesty was incandescent with rage, and that no matter what happened, they mustn't act rashly.

"I don't even know how to write in Han script—how am I supposed to give a written statement?" Lu Xu demanded, furious.

"Do I have to give one too?" the carp yao asked. "Every 'person' doesn't include me, right? I'm a fish."

"Someone can write it for you, and you can just sign and seal it." Once again, Huang Yong tried to counsel them. "Your chief's been framed. At a time like this, you *mustn't* do anything impulsive, under *any* circumstances."

To these exorcists, neither the military, the court officials, nor even the human emperor posed any threat whatsoever. Usually, with Li Jinglong around to keep them on a tight leash, they politely coexisted with the people of Chang'an. But now that Li Jinglong had been detained, Hongjun had half a mind to fight his way into the palace and whisk the chief away before agreeing to anything else.

Surprisingly, the Court of Judicial Review asked nothing more of them after taking their written statements. Hongjun attempted to find Cheng Xiao, but Cheng Xiao refused to see him. The exorcists were allowed to return to their headquarters.

The moment they were home, Hongjun declared, "I'm going to save the chief."

"I support you," Lu Xu said. "Let's go together."

"Both of you, calm down!" Mergen said. "Didn't we discuss this ages ago?"

“What did we discuss?” Hongjun asked. “They arrested him! Why would the emperor arrest him?” He was frustrated, and to make matters worse, he had no idea whom to fight.

“Xie Yu has made his move,” Qiu Yongsi said. “The chief warned us things would turn out like this if Xie Yu struck first.”

“But we still don’t know who he is,” Hongjun said.

“He’s Yang Guozhong,” Mergen responded without hesitation. “I’m certain of it now.”

Hongjun was on the verge of panic. Not only had Xie Yu been surveilling the Department of Exorcism’s every move, now Li Jinglong had fallen into his hands. They didn’t even know whether he was dead or alive.

“The next step in his plan may very well be dealing with the rest of us,” Lu Xu said. “The only question is, when will he come knocking?”

Mergen waved this aside. “Haven’t you realized Xie Yu’s true intentions by now? He’s trying to use us to get rid of the obstacles he can’t overcome on his own.”

Seeing the alarm in Hongjun’s eyes, Qiu Yongsi explained, “Don’t worry, Hongjun. The chief planned for this. Let’s appoint an interim leader first… How about you, you big idiot?”

“You’re taller than me,” Mergen retorted. “So who’s the bigger idiot?!”

Everyone stared, exasperated. Usually, when Li Jinglong was present, the members of the Department of Exorcism followed his orders. When he was absent, they were accustomed to listening to Mergen. They seemed to have established some strange chain of command based on the order of their

arrival at the dilapidated Department of Exorcism that first day. Of course, everyone tacitly agreed to skip over Hongjun.

"I…" Mergen glanced around. He began pairing them off in his head, only to find that he didn't trust Lu Xu with anyone. "Ashina Adarvan and I will go and keep an eye on the Yang Estate."

Ashina Adarvan hummed an affirmative, and Mergen turned to Qiu Yongsi and Lu Xu. "You two head over to the barracks where An Lushan's troops are quartered and gather intel. Do *not* alert them to your presence under any circumstances."

Qiu Yongsi acknowledged his orders as well. He glanced at Lu Xu, and the two moved out together.

"Hongjun and I will go to Xingqing Palace," A-Tai said to Mergen.

Mergen shot A-Tai a look—they had to keep a close eye on Hongjun. A-Tai nodded. Hongjun was frantic with worry, but he finally breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing his companions, usually so easygoing, become unexpectedly reliable under the circumstances.

After nightfall, Hongjun slung his pack with the carp yao over his back and snuck toward the outer wall of Xingqing Palace's rear hall with A-Tai. It was only half a year ago that the Department of Exorcism had carried out its first mission here, during which Li Jinglong had drawn his bow and shot that little fox from several hundred paces away.

"Second-in-Command's been so busy catching yao, only to be caught himself," the carp yao piped up from behind Hongjun. "How does that make any sense?"

“Huang Yong said he was framed.”

Hongjun was inexplicably anxious. He scaled the wall, then reached down to pull A-Tai up behind him. The two of them quietly jumped down on the other side.

“Does that mean you guys are next?” the carp yao asked.

“Whoever framed the chief,” A-Tai said, “they’ve made their position clear—they don’t plan to act themselves. They can just wait for us to make our move, and they’ll get exactly what they want.”

Whoever had laid this trap was extremely shrewd. The Department of Exorcism obeyed only Li Jinglong. With him detained, any action taken against the other exorcists would no doubt end poorly. Attempts to capture or imprison them would be useless, as they could escape anytime they wished. They might listen to the Court of Judicial Review for the time being, but Cheng Xiao had no way to control them; it would be too easy for the exorcists to use their investigation as an opportunity to turn the tables. The safest course of action was to leave them be and wait for Hongjun to grow impatient enough to attempt to free Li Jinglong. This would make Li Longji even more furious; after that, it would be impossible for Li Jinglong to clear his name.

Hongjun was stricken upon hearing A-Tai’s explanation.

“We just have to be careful,” A-Tai consoled him. “Now—let’s go.”

They crept through the gardens of Xingqing Palace. Three palace maids were playing with a parrot beneath the eaves of the open-air corridor. A-Tai plucked his barbat from where it was strapped to his back and motioned for Hongjun to cover his ears. With a few gentle strums, a melody

floated over the garden. The palace maids slumped against the corridor railing, asleep in the spring night.

As the pair tiptoed through the corridor, A-Tai continued his explanation: “The chief suspected that if Xie Yu was really in Chang’an, he’d be bound to make a move against you. After all, the demon seed in your body is the thing he wants most.”

At this, a chill stole over Hongjun’s heart. A-Tai said comfortingly, “Don’t worry. As long as we’re here, Xie Yu can’t touch you.”

Hongjun couldn’t help but feel warmed by these words. “You’re right.”

“So then, if you were Xie Yu, how would you go about removing pesky obstacles like us?” A-Tai scanned their surroundings to ensure they were alone before continuing in a hushed voice. “Naturally, you would deal with the chief first. If the Department of Exorcism loses the emperor’s trust, Xie Yu can chip away at us one at a time. That’s what we all suspected when the incidents at the imperial mausoleums began. Now that Xie Yu has the chief under his control, he thinks he can negotiate terms with us. If everything goes the way we expect, he’ll seek out Mergen of his own accord. As for us, all we have to do is make sure the chief is safe and sound.”

“When do you guys discuss this stuff?” Hongjun asked as he followed A-Tai, sneaking through the darkness. “The chief never spoke a word of any of this to me.”

“He didn’t want you to worry,” A-Tai said with a gentle smile. “He wants you to be happy and not be troubled by these things.”

Hongjun wasn’t sure how to respond.

A-Tai's footsteps came to a sudden halt as they approached the imperial study. In the inky darkness, a tendril of black smoke twisted over the imperial garden walls. The palace guards outside the imperial study failed to notice this strange intrusion; they collapsed without a sound as the black smoke curled into the garden. It seethed like a swarm of insects as it slowly molded itself into a stocky, bipedal form. Immediately, Hongjun and A-Tai recognized the yaoguai they had encountered in the imperial mausoleums.

The creature lurched toward the study, presently occupied by Li Longji.

Alarmed, Hongjun turned to A-Tai, who yanked him behind a pillar.

The yaoguai continued to solidify, its hunched body filling out with venomous insects as it grew a pair of arms that hung down to its feet. It had been difficult to see in the darkness of the mausoleums, but now, as the yaoguai's knuckles brushed the ground, they could see clearly that it had the body of a great ape.

The sight stirred something in the back of Hongjun's mind. He promptly reached into his pack for the carp yao. Setting the fish down, he whispered, "Zhao Zilong, look—is that an ape?"

"It's a poisonous gu[4] ape!" the carp yao yelped. "Hongjun! Stay away from that thing!"

A-Tai was struck dumb. They had only come to find Li Jinglong—to think they would run into this yaoguai again here. A second later, in a shocking transformation, the gu ape shifted into a completely different figure, this one dressed in regal robes and a twelve-chained crown.

Hongjun clutched his throwing knives with shaking hands. “Who is that?”

“An emperor…” A-Tai began. “I’m not sure which one—Li Zhi or Li Xian? Don’t attack it, Hongjun! Let’s see what it does!”

Hongjun barely held himself in check. The carp yao whispered, “This bastard’s extremely difficult to deal with. It’ll be no easy feat to kill him with your throwing knives, Hongjun. You need to be careful!”

The emperor the gu ape was impersonating was a middle-aged man with a lean face and refined features. He raised a hand toward the entrance of the imperial study, and the door flew open with a sharp *bang*.

The gu ape stepped inside, and Li Longji’s terrified shout rang out from within. “What the hell are you?! Guards—!”

A-Tai tugged at Hongjun, and the two of them rounded the pillar. They could only guess at what was happening in the imperial study. They heard an explosion, and a cloud of venomous insects shot back out, swarming over the walls of the imperial garden and streaking toward the horizon.

Hongjun stared after them.

“Check on His Majesty!” A-Tai shouted.

In the brightly lit imperial study, they found Li Longji slumped motionless in his seat. Hissing an oath under his breath, Hongjun hurried forward to put a finger under his nose, then felt for his pulse. He breathed a sigh of relief upon realizing Li Longji had merely fainted from fright.

Shouts sounded outside.

“Assassins!”

“Protect His Majesty!”

“They’re coming to catch you!” the carp yao hollered. “Get out of there!”

Hongjun pried Li Longji’s lips apart and shoved a reviving pill into his mouth before turning tail and sprinting out behind A-Tai. The carp yao had already found himself a bolt-hole, leaving Hongjun and A-Tai to dash through the imperial garden.

“Assassins! There they are!”

“Where did these clumsy oafs come from?”

Livid at the insult, A-Tai was about to turn and give a guard a vicious slap when Hongjun called from a few paces ahead, “Forget it! We don’t have time!”

He darted through a door, and A-Tai squeezed in behind him. It took them only a moment to realize they were hiding behind a folding screen in Gold Blossom’s Fall. A flick of A-Tai’s fan extinguished the lights, plunging the place into darkness just as a guard pounded on the door. “An assassin ran in here just now!”

“They’re long gone.” The low timbre of a man’s voice was accompanied by the languid thrum of strings.

Hongjun and A-Tai stared at each other in dismay. There was someone else inside Gold Blossom’s Fall.

“They came in through the front door and exited through the back. They were running toward the Hall of Supreme Harmony,” the man continued.

Outside, a guard called out, “Thank you, Master Li Guinian!”

The man awaiting them inside Gold Blossom's Fall was indeed that famous pipa player. After strumming the strings a few more times, he said, "You can come out now."

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Chapter 90:
Fellow Disciples

HONGJUN AND A-TAI stepped out from behind the folding screen. Li Guinian was sitting calmly beneath the ginkgo tree in Gold Blossom's Fall.

"I'm in the middle of composing a song for the noble consort's birthday," he said breezily. "What a coincidence to meet here."

The atmosphere shifted, taking on an eerie quality. A strange aura emanated from A-Tai as he shuffled a half step forward, putting himself between Hongjun and Li Guinian. Hongjun had only ever seen him look so serious during a fight.

"Is there something we can help you with?" A-Tai asked with a thin smile.

"There is indeed a topic on which I would certainly love to seek your counsel," Li Guinian said. "However, seeing as the two of you slipped into the palace this late at night, I suppose you have more important matters to attend to. You're here for the Marquis of Yardang, are you not?"

"We are," A-Tai answered.

"I can take you to the marquis," Li Guinian said pleasantly. "But after that, why don't we have a chat, Prince Tigra?"

Before A-Tai could respond, Li Guinan was rising to his feet. Shouldering his pipa, he motioned for them to follow and strode toward the door.

Hongjun strained his memory, trying to recall when Li Guinian and A-Tai might have become acquainted. *The only time they saw each other was when we visited the Spring Oriole in Pingkang Ward. What's going on?*

"The marquis has only been temporarily detained, not thrown in the dungeons," Li Guinian explained as he led them down a small winding path around Xingqing Palace's side hall and through a peaceful flower garden. He glanced over his shoulder at A-Tai. "Did you find the person you were seeking when you left so abruptly last time?"

A-Tai smiled. "So you did notice me—as I'd expect of Master Li Guinian."

Li Guinian beamed back. "I dare not accept such a lofty title. I did consider offering my help that day, seeing as you followed me all that way. But given your mastery of Saint Shirin's teachings and the support of all your good brothers, I assumed whatever obstacle you faced would pose little challenge."

From this brief exchange, Hongjun inferred an astronomical wealth of information. He was no longer as naive as he had been when he first arrived in Chang'an, and he was now struck by a thought—could Li Guinian be the real Xie Yu?

"Who are you?!" Hongjun asked sharply. "Li Guinian, are you human or yao?"

"What on earth are you thinking?" A-Tai rapped Hongjun on the back of the head with his fan, exasperated. Li Guinian burst into laughter.

"Granted, I did suspect you too, Li Guinian," A-Tai admitted. "That night when we listened to your performance, I sensed there was more to your playing than met the eye. That's why I followed you the night the chief and

the rest of my brothers disappeared—I thought you might be working with the fox yao who'd captured them."

Hongjun started in surprise. A mystery from months past was suddenly unraveled: A-Tai, who had claimed to have fallen asleep beneath a bridge, had in fact been tailing Li Guinian.

"I apologize for my lack of candor," Li Guinian said, his voice measured. "But I'm afraid I've my own troubles… Ah, we're here."

Stepping through the flower garden, they arrived at last at a secluded side courtyard surrounded by members of the Longwu Guard. This was where suspected criminals were detained pending trial.

For a moment, no one moved. A-Tai glanced at Li Guinian, who unslung his pipa in tacit understanding. After a moment of consideration, he ran his fingers lightly over the strings. A cascade of notes spilled out like drifting clouds and flowing water, and the guards outside the courtyard slumped over, asleep.

"This is…" Hongjun murmured. It was the same spiritual technique used by A-Tai.

A-Tai smiled. "If my guess is correct, Master Li Guinian is my dashixiong."[5]

He raised his right hand to the left side of his chest, palm up in a flying flame salute, and bowed toward Li Guinian. Li Guinian returned the gesture, then inclined his head to Hongjun. "Go on; the Marquis of Yardang is inside."

Li Jinglong was sitting in a corner, lost in thought, when he heard Hongjun's voice outside. "Jinglong!"

Jumping to his feet, he hurried to the iron bars of the window and came face-to-face with Hongjun. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, furious. “Did those guys send you?”

“I wanted to come.” Hongjun turned to look for the lock. There was a light *snick* as his throwing knife sliced through the latch with ease. He shoved the iron door open at the same moment Li Jinglong rushed forward to stop him, smacking Li Jinglong square in the forehead with a loud *thud*.

Li Jinglong staggered back, head spinning. Scared witless, Hongjun rapidly apologized while Li Jinglong waved a hand. “It’s okay; it’s been a while since I’ve been so unlucky…”

“It’s already swelling. Let me rub it for you,” Hongjun said. “It’s a good thing I didn’t break your nose.”

Li Jinglong didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Pulling Hongjun into his arms, he heaved a sigh.

“Let’s go!” Hongjun urged.

“I can’t,” Li Jinglong said, coming back to his senses. “Did you come alone? Did anyone see you?”

As Hongjun gave Li Jinglong a detailed account of their journey, Li Jinglong’s eyes widened with surprise. “I didn’t expect Li Guinian to be an ally… But why would he reveal himself now? It may only make things more difficult.”

Outside, Li Guinian and A-Tai stood quietly on the parade grounds. Moonlight spilled down from above, washing their faces in pale light.

“For ten years, I’ve been searching for a certain something,” Li Guinian said, finally serious. “Perhaps this is why you’ve come to the Central

Plains as well."

A-Tai frowned. "That's just a legend—even my teacher couldn't say for sure if it was true." He sighed. "I've long since given up on finding it. Why are you still looking? Dashixiong, you really are patient, staying in Chang'an all these years."

"Back when Saint Shirin traveled to the Central Plains, I was the only one of the three Li brothers lucky enough to learn the basics of the Celestial Song technique from her. Nevertheless, my name is not recorded among her formal disciples, Prince Tigra, so please don't address me as such."

"Was she the one who gave you the task of finding the sacred flame?" A-Tai asked.

Li Guinian nodded solemnly, waiting for A-Tai's next question.

"The sacred flame Atar will burn forever, incinerating all filth and illuminating the darkness for eternity," A-Tai began.

"He who holds the sacred flame will possess the power of the prophet Zoroaster. To the followers of light and the children of fire, seeing this flame is akin to meeting with Mani, Zoroaster, or Ahura Mazda. Follow in their footsteps, doing good and destroying evil, and you will live in the paradise of the gods of light…forever," Li Guinian finished. "If you wish to restore your nation, it would surely be much easier if you had the sacred flame."

"Something even Mani failed to find," A-Tai said, shaking his head. "It's an impossible task. I doubt it ever existed."

"It did exist," Li Guinian said. "Our teacher, the saint herself, came to the Central Plains all those years ago precisely to investigate this matter. The legends tell that nearly a thousand years ago, a group of Sogdians removed

the sacred flame from the Western Regions. When Xie Yu made Chang'an his seat and became the shadow king of the Central Plains several decades ago, I realized he must be linked to this matter."

A-Tai started in surprise. "Xie Yu has it?" he asked, his voice low.

"No," Li Guinian responded. "However, the sacred flame is closely tied to the heavenly demon. What have you learned in your investigation?"

The flow of air around them underwent a sudden shift. Li Guinian and A-Tai whipped their heads around as black clouds swarmed toward them from all sides. Li Guinian swung his cloak, and a blast of mist burst from the ground, enveloping him and A-Tai as they disappeared without a trace.

In the side courtyard, Li Jinglong met Hongjun's eyes and said earnestly, "Listen to me. Right now, I can't leave this place under any circumstances."

Hongjun huffed out a sigh. Feeling helpless, Li Jinglong reached out to take his hand. Hongjun flung him off.

"What's wrong now?" Li Jinglong examined Hongjun's face. "Why are you always angry with me?"

"It's fine," Hongjun said. "Go ahead and stay, then. I'm leaving."

Li Jinglong smiled; despite Hongjun's harsh words, he knew he didn't really want to leave. Grabbing Hongjun's hand, he said, "Hongjun, don't worry, everything will be fine."

Hongjun turned and looked at him intently, his brow creased with anger and anxiety. "Then tell me, what can I do? I have no idea what I should do. I admit I'm not smart. That's why you guys never tell me what's going

on. It’s all to protect me and to keep me from worrying, but even then, I still worry about you—about everyone else!”

His outburst brought Li Jinglong up short. It wasn’t his first time hearing Hongjun complain about this, but he had never seen him so emotional about it, especially after they’d already talked things out.

“I don’t want to be kept in the dark all the time like this!” Downtrodden, Hongjun continued, “Forget it, maybe I’m just not…not cut out to be an exorcist. I’m too stupid.”

“The heavenly demon inside the third host intends to get rid of Xie Yu,” Li Jinglong said abruptly. “Meanwhile, Xie Yu wants to use us to get rid of the rogue heavenly demon. It’s that simple.”

“That’s right.” A voice came from outside the courtyard. “It is simple. So why is it so difficult for you to understand?”

Hongjun whirled around—this voice belonged to Yang Guozhong!

At last, the time had come for both sides to lay their cards on the table. “I’ve been waiting for this day for a very long time,” Li Jinglong said grimly.

“I could say the same,” Yang Guozhong replied from afar. In the next instant, the brick and tile of the courtyard seemed to slide apart. The bricks hung suspended in midair for only a moment before flying in all directions, reassembling themselves from the ground up into a perimeter wall that closed the three of them off from the rest of the world.

“Your companions are at my estate,” Yang Guozhong said. “But after thinking it over, I felt there are some things that are better said to you in person.”

Light flared from Yang Guozhong's body. Hongjun instantly merged his throwing knives, but he didn't dare make any hasty moves. In response, Yang Guozhong lifted a hand, his palm spitting black flame that curled around Hongjun, who summoned his pentacolor sacred light to parry.

"Stop right there!" Li Jinglong shouted.

White light erupted from Li Jinglong's hand, blocking Yang Guozhong's attack. Yang Guozhong deflected the blast of energy with a flick of his sleeve, sending Li Jinglong and Hongjun crashing into a corner.

Hongjun's chest throbbed dully as Yang Guozhong stepped forward, the picture of calm even as black fire burned in his eyes. "Do you truly imagine that just because you managed to kill Wu Qiyu, you have the strength to challenge a yao king?"

Li Jinglong couldn't seem to stop coughing—but nevertheless, he insisted on shielding Hongjun behind him. Hongjun gathered his spiritual energy, preparing to surprise Yang Guozhong with a fatal blow when he drew within striking distance. Yet Li Jinglong pressed down on the back of Hongjun's hand, stilling his blade.

"You're an ambitious group of youngsters, I'll grant you that," Yang Guozhong said. He seemed unusually dignified, as if possessed by the spirit of a majestic sovereign. "Unfortunately, you still have a long way to go."

Li Jinglong was certain this attack was merely a show of strength to discourage any futile resistance, but he couldn't be sure how much of his power Yang Guozhong had used. His internal organs seemed to roil after that direct blast of yao energy; it was all he could do to avoid throwing up blood as he crouched on the ground.

Hongjun, accustomed to the presence of powerful yaoguai like Chong Ming and Qing Xiong, was unfazed by Yang Guozhong. But given that the yao before them had once defeated Chong Ming, driving the phoenix and other bird yao into the Taihang Mountains, his strength was at the very least equal to Chong Ming's. Recognizing that his own techniques were powerless against this enemy, Hongjun realized they could only try to outfox him.

"My heart lamp may be incapable of fending off your yao energy directly," Li Jinglong said, "but there's no way you can break the seal containing the demon seed inside Hongjun and take it away."

"*Your* heart lamp?" Yang Guozhong's voice was touched with sarcasm. "For all my calculations, I never expected the heart lamp to end up with you."

"Considering your abilities, you could have killed me much sooner," Li Jinglong said, his voice low. "Why didn't you?"

Yang Guozhong scoffed, then turned to regard Hongjun, seemingly deep in thought. Within this brief exchange, Li Jinglong had already deduced that there was something weighing on Yang Guozhong's mind—but what? Hongjun had once said that when Qing Xiong instructed him to take the heart lamp down the mountains, he had mentioned receiving the heart lamp from the divine kun of the North Sea, Yuan Kun. A yaoguai who possessed the unique ability to…

Sure enough, Yang Guozhong pinned Hongjun with his gaze. "What did the divine kun say when he gave you the heart lamp?"

Hongjun made no response. He was an inexpert liar and had yet to unravel the convoluted series of events that led them to this point. The best he could do was keep his guard up, ready to protect Li Jinglong against Yang Guozhong's next attack.

“You’re my dad’s enemy,” Hongjun said grimly. “I’m not answering any of your questions.”

It never occurred to Yang Guozhong that *my dad* meant Chong Ming. “On the contrary,” he said. “Not only am I not Kong Xuan’s enemy, I was his…friend.”

“Liar!” Hongjun shouted, furious.

Yang Guozhong smiled as he paced a few steps away. Standing with his back to them, he seemed more regal in bearing than even Li Longji as he gazed up at the bright moon.

“I met you when you were very young, Kong Hongjun,” he murmured.

This caught Hongjun off guard. Li Jinglong held up a hand, indicating he would handle it. Hongjun frowned. He glanced at Yang Guozhong, then back at Li Jinglong, his eyes filled with unspeakable anxiety. Li Jinglong covered his hand with his own, patting gently.

“It was shortly after you were born,” Yang Guozhong continued, turning to gaze intently at Hongjun. “You were a babe still in swaddling clothes. I met you again when you were one, two, two and a half, three…”

“Were you the reason we had to keep moving?” Hongjun glowered.

After a moment of thought, Yang Guozhong said, “I came to see you every year until you met Li Jinglong.”

“What?” This time, it was Li Jinglong’s turn to be stunned. His memory of that period was a complete blank.

“So you know everything.” Hongjun’s voice shook. “Xie Yu, tell me what happened.”

“That’s a secret that can only be shared between the two of us,” Yang Guozhong said. “Shall we plan to discuss it at a later time? You ought to know I bear you no ill will.”

“As if I’d believe you!” All of Hongjun’s grief and anger seemed to burst out of him. “My parents wouldn’t have had to move around all the time if it weren’t for you! They wouldn’t have died!”

“They died,” Yang Guozhong said, meeting Hongjun’s eyes. “But not because of me. In the depths of your heart, I’m sure you know the true cause of their deaths.”

The way Yang Guozhong danced around the events of the past left Li Jinglong with a gnawing sense of disquiet. He had everything else well in hand; Hongjun’s memory and past were the only holes in his information. It was entirely possible this gap in his knowledge would have tragic consequences.

Yang Guozhong glanced down at Li Jinglong and smiled. “In any case, the Marquis of Yardang has placed a seal on your demon seed—some insipid nonsense involving ‘love’ or ‘affection.’ I can’t take the seed from you, but you can’t remove it either. Neither of us can seize the advantage, so why don’t we make a deal?”

At last, Yang Guozhong spoke the words Li Jinglong had been waiting to hear. He pulled himself out of the messy tangle of his thoughts. They could take their time verifying facts later. Their priority now was handling their present predicament.

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Chapter 91:
A Century-Old Promise

DRAWING A STEADYING breath, Li Jinglong struggled to his feet, one hand on the wall for support. “You say you can’t take it from him, but I doubt that’s the case.”

“If I can’t, then I can’t,” Yang Guozhong said with a shrug. “I tried in the past, but it didn’t work. Now that you’ve sealed it with the heart lamp, unless Hongjun voluntarily descends into demonhood, there is nothing anyone can do. I already have three demon seeds of my own. I no longer require the body of the Peacock Wisdom King to become a demon, so there’s no harm in telling you the truth.”

“Two demon seeds,” Li Jinglong corrected.

“That’s right.” Yang Guozhong’s face grew overcast as he said coldly, “You destroyed the demon seed I so painstakingly created from one of my immortal souls in Dunhuang. I have yet to settle this score.”

Li Jinglong smiled. “Chancellor Yang—or should I say, Your Majesty, the yao king—it’s funny. I haven’t said a word against you, yet here you are leveling accusations at me.”

Yang Guozhong flicked his sleeves. “Would you prefer I hand over all three of my heart demons and help your little friend descend into demonhood now, free of charge?”

As Li Jinglong blanched, Yang Guozhong continued, “With your meager abilities, it was pure luck you managed to seal all the nightmares swirling within the mortal world. Anything more than that, and your heart

lamp would have been destroyed. It's good for a young man to have confidence in himself, but I suggest you not let it get to your head."

"There will come a day when you can no longer retrieve the immortal souls you used to create the demon seeds," Li Jinglong said quietly. "What kind of deal are you looking for?"

There was a long silence as Yang Guozhong studied Li Jinglong. At last, he said with a hint of real appreciation, "Marquis, you're much smarter than I imagined."

"The second of your demon seeds is in your body," Li Jinglong said, placid as a cloudless sky. "Am I right?"

Yang Guozhong offered no answer. Hongjun said quietly, "Lu Xu possessed the world's nightmares—that's how you created his heart demon. In that case, what is feeding yours?"

Spotting a shift in Yang Guozhong's expression, Li Jinglong knew Hongjun's question had struck the mark. The black jiao Xie Yu had transformed his three immortal souls into heart demons. The first was meant to use the soul of the white deer residing within Lu Xu's body to absorb the world's nightmares. Likewise, the second—which he kept within his own body—must absorb pain and resentment from somewhere. As for the third—if Li Jinglong's suspicions were correct, it was inside An Lushan.

Naturally, Yang Guozhong had no wish to divulge the method he used to refine his other heart demons. Instead, he cut straight to the point: "I want you to help me retrieve the third heart demon."

"The one in An Lushan?" Li Jinglong asked—finally, they had discovered Yang Guozhong's weakness.

“Correct.” Yang Guozhong nodded politely. “Ten years ago, when I turned my immortal souls into three demon seeds, I gave one of them to that bastard. An Lushan used a spiritual device to sever my link to my third immortal soul and take the energy it had absorbed for himself. Since then, he has become increasingly unmanageable. What I need is someone to kill him and release the heart demon trapped within his body.”

Hongjun found the situation unspeakably absurd. He had come to Chang’an to kill Xie Yu, yet not only had he failed to do so, now Xie Yu was asking *them* for a favor.

Li Jinglong shot Hongjun a glance. “Chancellor Yang, surely you’re aware that, to the Department of Exorcism, both Xie Yu and the heavenly demon are targets for elimination,” he said. “What makes you so sure we’ll agree to a deal?”

Yang Guozhong laughed—a short, sharp sound. “Marquis, forgive my bluntness, but you are the ones who forced my hand. If not for your meddling in the imperial mausoleums case, I would never have taken such a risk.”

“You flatter me,” Li Jinglong said. “What I mean is, what does it matter to the Department of Exorcism if An Lushan wants you dead?”

“I expected you to grasp my meaning the day I came to call,” Yang Guozhong said, a chill in his voice. “Given the abilities of your little band, subduing a single gu ape should have been child’s play.”

Hongjun looked at Li Jinglong in surprise.

Yang Guozhong had seen through him; Li Jinglong stopped trying to needle him and spoke frankly. “That’s right. This was the only way we could force you to come out and deal with this matter in person.”

“You don’t know this,” Yang Guozhong said, each word deliberate as he stepped closer, his aura billowing outward, “but even if I dearly wish to kill someone, I still must have a reason. I will not kill those with whom I am aligned. But An Lushan brings only death and destruction. As things stand, we are both backed into a corner; we must join forces to eliminate him.”

“Are these not the consequences of your own mistake?” Li Jinglong asked.

Yang Guozhong scrutinized him with narrowed eyes. “They are. What of it?”

“I can help you recover the third demon seed,” Li Jinglong said. “But surely you’re aware of the terms I’ll put forth.”

Yang Guozhong fixed Li Jinglong with an inscrutable look.

“Why are you so determined to become Mara?” Hongjun asked. “My dad was so resistant to it that he ended up harming me and my mother… But you—”

“That’s why I’ve changed my mind,” Yang Guozhong said.

Hongjun’s breath quickened as Yang Guozhong resumed his slow pacing around the perimeter wall. “I cannot meet your terms, Li Jinglong,” he said gravely. “If you demand too dear a price, I will only make you a low counteroffer. You see, I can simply wait another hundred years.”

He looked at Hongjun as he finished, and Hongjun understood in an instant: Yang Guozhong meant to wait until they were all dead.

A century in the human realm was nothing to a powerful yaoguai like Xie Yu, whose life could span hundreds, even thousands, of years. At most, it would be akin to a few years—perhaps a decade—in the life of an ordinary

mortal. In a hundred years, Li Jinglong would have long since passed from this world; by then, the grudges of the past would no longer be so important. Hongjun could foresee that as soon as he and Li Jinglong died, Yang Guozhong would come to take his demon seed.

“And if I live past a hundred?” Hongjun asked coldly.

“You won’t.” Yang Guozhong gazed at Hongjun with a smile curling his lips. “Half yao like you have the same lifespan as ordinary mortals. This is ordained by the heavens—you cannot possess both divine powers and the wisdom of age. Perhaps I won’t even have to wait a hundred years. Feel free to make any posthumous arrangements you like; you can postpone this predestined war even further if you want.”

An inexplicable feeling of relief washed over Hongjun. Truth be told, he’d had no idea how long he would live. Chong Ming had never mentioned this, yet it had been a question he’d pondered on more than one occasion.

Li Jinglong glanced at him, then back at Yang Guozhong. “You must leave Chang’an,” he said, his voice low.

“Of course,” Yang Guozhong agreed. “After all, your mortal emperor is already a candle guttering in the wind. My reign in Chang’an is coming to an end. After he passes, I shall take Yuhuan away with me.”

Hongjun was instantly suspicious. Yang Guozhong was willingly giving up everything he’d built here? He could see only two possibilities: One, Yang Guozhong was lying; or two, unless he retrieved the heart demon from An Lushan, Yang Guozhong would soon die as well. Before he could comment, Li Jinglong stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. The silence stretched.

“I’ll need your decision sooner rather than later,” Yang Guozhong said at last.

“I fear if I agree so easily today,” Li Jinglong said calmly, “then when I depart this world, I won’t be able to face the ghosts of the ordinary mortals who met wrongful deaths at your hands.”

“This is war, not murder,” Yang Guozhong said, examining Li Jinglong. “I see the Marquis of Yardang is a righteous man who abhors evil, but the conflict between humans and yao has raged since long before you or I were born. The yao who have died by human hands number in the tens of millions.”

Hongjun again felt that Yang Guozhong was lying, though he couldn’t see any signs of deception. Li Jinglong said, soft and succinct, “Deal.”

“You have twenty days.” Yang Guozhong flicked his sleeves, and the walls around them crumbled. “The Department of Exorcism will cease its operations during this time, and you will remain a wanted fugitive.” He turned to study Li Jinglong once more. “An Lushan is using a spiritual device to guard the heart demon seed in his body. Once this device is removed, I should be able to summon the third of my immortal souls. Do not attempt anything reckless, Li Jinglong; I assure you, you lack the ability to destroy it.”

As he spoke, Yang Guozhong sketched an array in the air before him—the very same the Department of Exorcism had once analyzed. There was a brief hum, and Li Jinglong and Hongjun were transported away.

When Li Jinglong reappeared in the alleyway behind the Department of Exorcism, Hongjun was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Hongjun?! Hongjun!” Li Jinglong began shouting at once.

Yang Guozhong’s voice echoed in the alleyway. “Worry not—I’m not taking him hostage. I will return him to you in one hour.”

Hongjun’s vision flashed white; in the next breath, he found himself in a lavishly decorated courtyard. Cherry blossoms drifted past on the wind. There was no sign of Li Jinglong. As he got to his feet to look around, he spotted Yang Guozhong ambling toward him.

“Where’s Li Jinglong?” Hongjun demanded, immediately furious.

“Let’s have a chat,” Yang Guozhong said, the picture of serenity. His tone was no longer so imperious; now he spoke as if he were nothing more than an ordinary family friend. “I can send you back now if you wish to leave.”

Hongjun drew a steadying breath as Yang Guozhong stepped into the garden, where he sat down with his hands on his knees. He called for the housekeeper, who soon arrived. Yang Guozhong gave the man instructions to bring the pastries Hongjun favored along with a pot of tea.

“Do you remember your father?” Yang Guozhong asked.

Hongjun was torn. Qing Xiong and Chong Ming had once ordered him to kill Xie Yu so the phoenix clan might return to Chang’an. Yet he had come to the inescapable realization that, even with Li Jinglong at his side, he was no match for the yao king.

Perhaps it was just as well. Since coming to Chang’an, he had discovered that many things were not as simple as he’d thought. He could no longer see the world in black and white.

“You lied to us,” Hongjun said coldly. “All you’ve ever wanted was the demon seed inside me.”

“Obviously,” Yang Guozhong replied. “Did you really expect me to help Li Jinglong in his mission to fight evil, uphold virtue, and exorcise yao in defense of proper Confucian values?”

Hongjun slowly shook his head. “Well, I won’t fall for your tricks.”

“When you were little, I advised your dad to entrust you to me. You thought I was the person chasing your parents all over the land?”

Hongjun made no response.

“You are different from the others,” Yang Guozhong said, watching Hongjun with a deeply furrowed brow. “You’re the son of Kong Xuan, and the adopted child of Chong Ming and Qing Xiong. The blood that runs in your veins is half yao, Kong Hongjun. Why be so obstinate? Don’t you feel the slightest hint of kinship when you see me? We are the king of all yao under heaven, yet to you, we’re no better than that old geezer Li Longji?”

While Hongjun was momentarily speechless, Yang Guozhong motioned toward the pastries. “If I wanted to poison you, I would have done so ages ago. How much of the people’s lifeblood have you already eaten?”

He had a point—but still, Hongjun didn’t move. “I don’t want any. I’m not worried you’ll poison me. I don’t eat at the table of my enemies.”

“There is no such thing as an everlasting enemy, only temporary friends.” Yang Guozhong looked at Hongjun with interest, then continued, “It seems the phoenix and the golden-winged great peng never taught you these things. They’ve protected you very well.”

“What are you trying to say?” Hongjun narrowed his eyes; there had to be a reason Yang Guozhong had separated him from Li Jinglong.

“I merely wanted to see you,” Yang Guozhong said, earnest now. “What kind of person you’ve become. After all, your father once promised me you would one day become my disciple.”

“What?!” Hongjun could scarcely believe his ears.

“Why do you think your parents moved to Chang’an before they died?” Yang Guozhong asked. “Unfortunately, ten years ago, a momentary lapse in judgment led me to fall prey to the plot set out by Di Renjie, and all my efforts came to naught. Now, thanks to Chong Ming and Qing Xiong’s teachings, you have become foolishly stubborn. We can no longer be master and disciple.”

Standing before Yang Guozhong, Hongjun felt himself waver. He still knew too little about that incident from the past; the period of time Yang Guozhong referred to remained a vast blank in his mind. But why hadn’t Yang Guozhong mentioned any of this until now?

“Ten years ago, it was your father who suggested I transform my three immortal souls into heart demons. Why else would I expend so much energy on such a venture?”

Hongjun’s eyes went wide. “My dad…?”

Yang Guozhong slowly nodded. “Mara appears once a millennium. Demon seeds absorb excess malign energies not taken into the heavenly and earthly meridians; when they have absorbed enough, they transform their host into a demon. In my case, all the nightmares of the mortal world came together to form the first demon seed; the unresolved loneliness, suffering, and sadness of separation formed the second; and the bitterness born of

wrongful death formed the third. All malign energies are produced in this manner."

Immediately, Hongjun recalled the storm of resentful energy released when the fox yao were burnt to ash, when Fei'ao was exorcised, and when he used demonic energy to grind the dark lady and the plague god into a pulp in Dunhuang. "So the one inside An Lushan…"

"It was created from the resentment of unjust death. You ought to know how difficult it is for an old man of over a thousand years such as myself to endure so much pain and suffering. Especially when I don't have the protection of the heart lamp, as you do."

"Xie Yu, why do you want to become a demon?" Hongjun asked. "Don't say it was to save my life. I don't believe you."

Yang Guozhong regarded Hongjun quietly. "Of course it's not for you, but for myself. Hongjun, can you imagine the agony of being locked at the bottom of a tower for nearly a thousand years?"

Hongjun fell silent.

"There is no future, no passage of time. In the boundless void of darkness, all you can feel is the seals around you, binding you in place. You have no future; you can only agonize over your past. *That* is what the humans did to me."

Yang Guozhong studied the expression on Hongjun's face, then slowly smiled. "Your companion Qiu Yongsi is still searching for me. He wants to lock me up again."

"But before that, you committed terrible crimes!" Hongjun argued.

“I was merely living my life in the Yangtze River,” Yang Guozhong responded. “The humans fed on the fish and shrimp in the water, and I fed on the humans on the shore; what crime is there in that?”

Hongjun’s head spun; he had no way to dispute his argument.

“I know you cannot accept the truth all at once,” Yang Guozhong said. “Let’s leave things here for now, my dear disciple.”

“I’m not your disciple!”

“There is sure to come a day when you change your mind and recognize the ugliness of the world. Until then”—Yang Guozhong leaned in and said with utmost seriousness—“think carefully about what I said. Come find me once you have made your decision. Hongjun, Yuan Kun cannot help you. Only I can save you.”

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Chapter 92:
Interconnected

THE MEMBERS of the Department of Exorcism convened once again at Lanling Amber.

The carp yao, after being separated from Hongjun and A-Tai in the imperial gardens, had discovered a huge clue. While the manifestation of a late emperor of the Li family was throwing the palace into chaos, the carp yao snuck up to the rooftop to look for Hongjun. Instead, he had discovered a pair of poisonous gu apes lurking behind the walls of Xingqing Palace. They were undoubtedly two of the four cardinal vices: the yao known as Wine, Lust, Greed, and Wrath.

As the gu apes departed, one mentioned that “Lord Mara” had sent some of their fellows to Luoyang to hunt down Yuan Kun. They had no idea whether they had succeeded in capturing the divine kun, so it was critical they move as quickly as possible to avoid further complications.

As soon as Zhao Zilong finished his report, Li Jinglong made his own: He informed everyone that Yang Guozhong was indeed Xie Yu and gave a brief account of what had transpired inside Xingqing Palace.

Everyone else followed suit. A-Tai told the others about Li Guinian’s true identity; Mergen and Ashina Adarvan had gone to the Chancellor Estate but noticed nothing unusual; Lu Xu and Qiu Yongsi reported that two of the burly generals under An Lushan’s command had left Chang’an that night, and that their present whereabouts were unknown.

A thoughtful silence fell over the room. Hongjun still had yet to return. Rationally, Li Jinglong knew Yang Guozhong was trying to scare him—he hoped Li Jinglong would assume the yao king had taken Hongjun hostage and thus seriously consider his terms. Nevertheless, Hongjun's absence preyed on his nerves.

"Now that we know Xie Yu's identity, things will be easier," Qiu Yongsi said.

"He wouldn't dare reveal himself now unless he'd already made his preparations," Li Jinglong responded. "As it stands, the yao king will be an extremely difficult adversary."

"Have you guys noticed something?" Mergen asked after a moment of thought. "Xie Yu established himself as Yang Guozhong in the imperial court, but none of the yaoguai under his command are at his side."

Li Jinglong nodded. "He doesn't have any subordinates in Chang'an right now. As for An Lushan, we've confirmed he has at least four powerful yaoguai at his disposal. If it comes down to pure strength, it's possible Xie Yu has already lost."

"Perhaps that's precisely why that jiao has no choice but to come to you for help," Ashina Adarvan said.

The curtain twitched. Everyone jumped in surprise as Hongjun ducked beneath it to join them in the room.

"Hongjun!"

"Are you all right?!"

Hongjun seemed tired but offered everyone a reassuring smile. Li Jinglong examined him with a look of worry, and Hongjun gave him a small

nod. He fell into a lengthy silence before gesturing to the seat beside him. “Xie Yu is lying to us,” Li Jinglong concluded.

“Well, of course,” Qiu Yongsi said. “That black jiao is devilishly cunning. There’s no way he’ll honor his promises.”

Hongjun was distracted; the question Yang Guozhong had asked him seemed to echo in his ears: *What did the divine kun say when he gave you the heart lamp?*

Why was Yang Guozhong so fixated on Yuan Kun? Since childhood, Hongjun’s only knowledge of the divine kun came from what Qing Xiong told him. According to Qing Xiong, it was Yuan Kun who had entrusted him with the heart lamp. Thinking back on it now, all these coincidences seemed too neat somehow. Yuan Kun had passed the heart lamp to Hongjun through Qing Xiong. On the night Hongjun arrived in Chang’an, he had just so happened to encounter Li Jinglong, who had absorbed the heart lamp into his body. The two of them had fallen in love, allowing Li Jinglong to use the heart lamp to temporarily seal his demon seed. Everything was interconnected, pushing him step by step, through a chain of cause and effect, toward an unknown destination.

At last, after the death of the fox yao, Yuan Kun had revealed himself in Chang’an and disclosed that, as a yao king, he possessed a powerful ability…

“The golden-winged great peng can read minds, and the divine kun of the North Sea can see the future,” the carp yao said, interrupting Hongjun’s thoughts. “Perhaps the heavenly demon wants to know what the future holds.”

Hongjun glanced up, his eyes meeting Li Jinglong's. He looked to the carp yao and asked, "Does the divine kun really know what will happen in the future?"

"Legend says he can show people their destiny, but it's not always accurate," the carp yao replied. "Sometimes, a person's fate can be changed."

Hongjun fell silent. Yuan Kun hadn't shown him anything. He had no way to answer Yang Guozhong's question.

Lu Xu looked at Hongjun with worry. "Hongjun, are you all right?"

Hongjun hastily nodded and forced a smile. As a matter of fact, several pieces of information, hazy until now, had suddenly become clear.

Li Jinglong crossed his arms in thought. After pondering at length, he spoke up. "Zhao Zilong's information is significant. The divine kun recently came to Chang'an. At some point, unbeknownst to us, he fought Xie Yu."

"Xie Yu must be in possession of an extremely powerful spiritual device if he managed to injure the divine kun and drive him away," the carp yao said. "You mustn't provoke him under any circumstances."

Raising a hand, Li Jinglong said, "Yuan Kun's wounds may be serious; we should try to find him."

"I can go," Mergen offered.

"I'll go," Li Jinglong said firmly. "I'm a wanted man right now—"

A terrible racket outside cut off the rest. Amid the chaos, someone shouted, "The fugitive Li Jinglong has escaped custody! Step aside! The Longwu Guard will conduct a search of the premises!"

"Speak of the devil," A-Tai said, torn between laughter and tears.

Mouth twitching, Li Jinglong looked around for some place to hide when there came the crack of a whip, followed by the soldiers' pained howls. A tumultuous clamor ensued, accompanied by Turandokht's furious scolding.

No one in the Department of Exorcism had ever been struck by her whip, but each of their scalps nevertheless went numb with fright upon hearing the Longwu Guard's agonized wails. They all sat frozen for a moment; at last, Li Jinglong calmly issued his orders over the sound of screams.

"Hongjun and I will go to Luoyang and track down the gu apes that left Chang'an," Li Jinglong said. "Perhaps we can force An Lushan to reveal himself if we use them as hostages. The rest of you are responsible for identifying the spiritual device he's using to guard the heart demon in his body. Either find a way to destroy it or—"

A-Tai opened his mouth, then seemed to hesitate. Noticing at once, Li Jinglong turned to him. "Do you want to take on this task?"

Everyone looked at A-Tai. After a long moment of consideration, he slowly nodded.

"You're sure you can do it?" Li Jinglong asked.

"I don't know," A-Tai admitted quietly. "But I'll do my best."

"What about me? What about me?" the carp yao asked.

"You stay put," Li Jinglong said.

"But I want to go with you."

"I said, stay put!"

Their bickering continued until Hongjun said, "Zhao Zilong, you stay here."

Hongjun had spoken, so the carp yao had no choice but to stay. Li Jinglong glanced around the room, deep in thought.

“Assuming everything goes according to plan, how do we turn the tables?” Mergen asked. “And when should we make our move?”

Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “The noble consort’s birthday. We’ll reveal the gu apes and attack An Lushan then, forcing him to show his true colors. As for how, we won’t know until after we’ve caught the yaoguai.”

Everyone nodded.

Struck by a thought, Hongjun asked, “What if An Lushan decides to sacrifice his subordinates instead of revealing his true form?”

“Then we’ll use the heart lamp to exorcise him,” Li Jinglong answered calmly. “It’ll be just like what we did at Dunhuang. As long as we can separate him from his spiritual device, I’m confident we can force him out of hiding.”

Hongjun fell silent as he recalled the battle at Dunhuang. The demon seed inside him seemed to have a natural command over demonic energy; if he wanted to, he could absorb it from anyone, at any time or any place, even if it was drifting untethered between heaven and earth. If he could absorb An Lushan’s demonic energy…that would be the easiest way to defeat their enemy.

“Hey.” Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. “What are you thinking?”

Hongjun quickly straightened in his seat. “Nothing.”

Noticing everyone’s eyes on him, Hongjun thought, *Am I really that easy to read? Why can everyone always tell what I’m thinking?*

“You and I should…” Li Jinglong began hesitantly. “Never mind. In any case, we need to hit the road as soon as possible. A-Tai—”

They would soon be traveling to Luoyang together; Li Jinglong would have plenty of time to talk to Hongjun later. He rose and signaled for A-Tai to follow him.

With the Department of Exorcism temporarily suspended from duty, they had no choice but to stay in the tavern. Hongjun followed Lu Xu through the courtyard and into his room, where the carp yao was already busy packing his travel bag. Yang Guozhong had at least given Li Jinglong enough time to collect their belongings from the Department of Exorcism’s headquarters.

As Hongjun watched Zhao Zilong work, he was seized by a premonition. “I feel like the Department of Exorcism’s fate has nearly run its course.”

“Don’t say that!” Lu Xu turned pale.

“Hongjun, you’re overthinking again!” the carp yao admonished.

Hongjun glanced at Lu Xu. “Do you still have the ability to make me dream of the past?”

Lu Xu considered the question. “Have you changed your mind?”

Hongjun nodded seriously. After speaking with Yang Guozhong today, he couldn’t help dwelling on the events of his childhood. For some reason, he was struck by the feeling that everything was about to come to a head—that his fate would soon be revealed.

“Hongjun, don’t,” Lu Xu said.

But Hongjun merely lay down on his bed and turned to look at Lu Xu. “The divine kun possesses the ability to show people their future, but he’s never shown me mine.”

“The future is uncertain,” the carp yao interjected. “Master Xuanzang once told me that even if you know everything that will happen, it’s only one of many possible futures. And when you’re aware of one possibility, that knowledge might affect your actions in the present and alter that future.”

“But the past is always certain,” Hongjun countered.

“That’s not true,” Lu Xu broke in. “The past is also uncertain.”

Hongjun blinked, perplexed.

“Neither the past nor the future exists. All that exists is the present,” Lu Xu said.

This was something far beyond Hongjun’s understanding, but he remained stubborn. “Lu Xu, let me dream of my past one more time. Please —I need to know.”

With a sigh, Lu Xu stepped up beside Hongjun’s bed. Gazing down at him, he steepled his fingers; the long strands of his hair paled instantly to a snowy white as his whole body began to glow.

The carp yao yelped in alarm and slowly backed away. Hongjun stared in shock as Lu Xu’s body seemed to lose its solidity, turning translucent and bright as an immortal soul. A pair of stunted horns sprouted from his forehead; his severed antlers had yet to recover.

“I grant you a peaceful sleep undisturbed by nightmares.” Lu Xu’s voice was hoarse as he clasped Hongjun’s hand. He lay down beside him in a fluid motion and tightened his grip.

It was different from when he touched Hongjun's forehead. This time, when Hongjun closed his eyes, a thousand rays of white light streaked past with a rush of wind, ferrying him down the tunnel of his memory.

"I'm here," Lu Xu murmured next to his ear.

Countless black flames erupted within the passageway, licking hungrily toward them.

"What are those?!" Hongjun asked.

Lu Xu waved a hand; white light burst forth like shooting stars, scattering the black flames.

"The nightmares you recently absorbed," Lu Xu said. "This passage is the barrier guarded by the heart lamp."

Hongjun's consciousness gradually settled. With another flash of white light, he and Lu Xu exited the passageway, emerging into a heavy rain.

This time, he hadn't been transported into his childhood body. Rather, he found himself a pale soul floating in midair, like Lu Xu. His attire had changed as well: He wore a combat qun, as he did at Yaojin Palace, with seven peacock feathers fluttering behind him. Lu Xu was wreathed in white light beside him, the antlers atop his head flickering from time to time.

"No matter what happens, don't let go of my hand," Lu Xu warned.

Hongjun's eyes widened as he caught sight of his father. Kong Xuan was using a spiritual technique to boil a basin of water beneath the eaves of an open-air corridor as loud sobs emanated from inside the house.

The front doors slid open, and Yang Guozhong strode into the residence.

The dreamscape began to shudder around them as Hongjun's emotions surged. Lu Xu immediately said, "Hongjun! Stay calm—don't lose yourself!"

"Dad—"

"Hongjun!" Lu Xu said sharply. Hongjun snapped back to the present, struggling for composure.

Things were different now that he was an observer rather than a participant in the dream. A single stray thought, and the dreamscape would shatter; he could only rely on Lu Xu for strength and do his best to quiet his mental state.

The dreamscape blurred, the seasons changing from winter to summer, then summer to winter again. As snow fell in pure white flakes, the scenery shifted to reveal Kong Xuan walking out of the general's estate in Yumen District with a tiny Hongjun, just under a year old, strapped to his back. Despite his tight swaddling against the cold, his little nose and cheeks were bright red.

"I saw my uncle!" Hongjun exclaimed.

"Follow me," Lu Xu said.

Tugging on Hongjun's hand, Lu Xu flew after Kong Xuan as he spurred his horse across the vast snowfields. The scenery flickered again, and they arrived at the foot of a snowcapped mountain range. The night seemed to glow as the Milky Way wrapped the sky in a glittering belt of starlight. A white deer stepped lightly across the powdered luster of those stars, prancing into the distance.

"That's you," Hongjun said with a smile.

Lu Xu hummed in affirmation. But in the next instant, a roar shook heaven and earth as a black jiao twisted out of the darkness and sank its fangs into the white deer's flank.

Kong Xuan jerked his head up, wheeling his horse around and galloping for a nearby village.

Heart in his throat, Hongjun gazed toward the horizon. Seconds later, Kong Xuan soared into the night sky to engage the black jiao. His father's midnight-blue robes gleamed with streams of golden light as battle armor materialized to cover his body.

Hongjun's eyes went huge; this was his first time seeing the true form of his father, the Peacock Wisdom King Mahamayuri.

"Without the demon seed of Mara, you no longer possess the power of the demonic and the divine," the black jiao snarled as they clashed.

"And you have only a single immortal soul," Kong Xuan responded in a ringing voice. "I'd say we're about even."

Howling in pain, the black jiao coiled higher into the sky. The white deer in its jaws let out a mournful cry and dispersed into flecks of light. One glowing tendril shot toward the village at the foot of the white-capped mountains. Kong Xuan turned to chase after the black jiao, only to pause as he heard a baby's distressed wails.

Another flash of light. Hongjun and Lu Xu stood hand in hand in the middle of Lu Xu's family home, where Kong Xuan was helping Lu Xu's mother deliver and then wash her son. Little Hongjun balanced himself on unsteady feet as he clung to Kong Xuan's shoulders and gazed down at the newborn Lu Xu.

Hongjun and Lu Xu watched in silence. After a time, Lu Xu flew out of the house, pulling Hongjun by the hand. They came to a stop above the Mogao Caves, where they saw Kong Xuan sitting with the ghost king atop the nine-storied pagoda with the child Hongjun once again strapped to his back.

“He loved you,” Lu Xu said suddenly.

Hongjun hummed in agreement. He felt horribly conflicted. Upon learning the truth of his past, he had hated his father, hated Chong Ming and Qing Xiong… But no matter the strength of his hatred in the moment, it had faded with the passage of time. Now, as he watched his father ride across the land with his infant son on his back, trying to find some way to make up for his mistakes, Hongjun was nearly drowned by a wave of sorrow.

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Chapter 93:
Pieces of the Past

ANOTHER FLASH. They were in Jiangnan now, on a luxuriant spring day in the third month of the year. Hongjun and Lu Xu, hands still linked, hovered above an embankment lush with willow trees and watched as his father rowed a little boat along the river. The young Hongjun leaned over the wooden side, staring down at the fish in the lake.

Beside him, his mother whipped her delicate hand into the water and splashed Hongjun in the face. The child Hongjun stared at her, completely dumbfounded, as she burst into laughter.

Watching this scene, Hongjun and Lu Xu couldn't help chuckling as well.

Their surroundings changed again: Amid rolling thunder and torrential rain, a black jiao threaded its sinuous body into a temple atop a high peak and transformed into Yang Guozhong.

Hongjun and Lu Xu peered into the courtyard. Yang Guozhong and Kong Xuan sat shoulder to shoulder beneath the temple's eaves, their faces upturned as they watched the rain.

"He really wasn't the one who forced us to move," Hongjun said.

"It's odd, isn't it?" Lu Xu said as he studied Kong Xuan and Yang Guozhong. "Why does it seem like your dad is sometimes Xie Yu's enemy, but at other times, they're friends?"

"It's been years," said Hongjun, furrowing his brow. "Maybe they made peace with each other—or maybe Xie Yu has deceived him. Lu Xu, do

you hate Xie Yu?”

“Life is inherently unpredictable,” Lu Xu responded. “What use is hatred? If I hadn’t fallen under Xie Yu’s control, my mother and father wouldn’t have died. I killed my parents, just like you.”

“But Xie Yu was the one who caused all this,” Hongjun protested.

“The timber has already been carved into a boat,” Lu Xu said. “To be born, to grow old, to get sick, to die—all of these are inevitable. What point is there in hating him? Sooner or later, Xie Yu will die as well.”

“You saw the future?”

“I simply believe this to be true.”

Spring turned into autumn, and the leaves yellowed and fell from their branches. As the scenery blurred and then sharpened again, Hongjun and Lu Xu found themselves in the Chang’an of many years past.

Little Hongjun—several years older now—glanced over his shoulder as he scampered out into the courtyard.

“Kong Chouxing!” his mother shouted after him.

Hongjun called something back in response and waved a hand at Li Jinglong, who was perched atop the courtyard wall. Li Jinglong promptly ducked down, while Hongjun hurried over to a flowerbed, where he pretended a great interest in the worms.

“I’m heading to the West Market to get these sold,” his mother said, striding toward him as she sorted through a stack of embroidered pouches. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Anything’s fine,” Hongjun responded, bored.

“This child—why hasn’t he been clamoring for meat lately?” Jia Yuze wondered to herself as she stepped out the door.

“We were so poor when I was little,” Hongjun commented as he watched from above.

“My family was even poorer,” Lu Xu said.

Hongjun didn’t know what to say. To think his mother had been forced to sell her embroidery work to support the family. There was no sign of his father in this scene; very likely, he was out plying his trade as a doctor.

“Gege! Gege!” As soon as his mother was out of sight, Hongjun called toward the other side of the courtyard wall.

Little Li Jinglong poked his head back out. “Your mom’s gone?” He tossed a twisted rope ladder over the wall. Hongjun clambered to the top, and the two children pulled the ladder up after them.

Lu Xu and Hongjun drifted over the wall. The Li Jinglong before them had yet to turn ten. He lifted the lid off a food box and handed it to Hongjun, who dug in as if starved.

“Look how ravenous you were,” Lu Xu commented expressionlessly.

His childhood behavior was so embarrassing Hongjun wanted to disappear. But in the next breath Lu Xu consoled him. “As a kid, I used to eat anything I could get my hands on too. My family was so poor I could never eat my fill.”

Hongjun didn’t know whom he ought to blame, but as he watched his childhood self, he felt his throat tighten.

After Hongjun had eaten, Li Jinglong led him to the open-air corridor, where they played a game of weiqi. When they tired of their game, Li

Jinglong opened a book, and Hongjun taught him meditation and martial arts.

“Why are you always so gloomy?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Because there’s a monster inside my body.”

“Is the monster inside you the monster of doom and gloom?”

The young Hongjun sank into a sullen silence.

“I’m sure it can be cured; don’t worry. Leave it to Gege.”

“It can’t. My parents have already tried a lot of things. They fight about it every day.”

“You don’t hate him?” Lu Xu asked, looking at Li Jinglong.

“I fell in love with him too quickly,” Hongjun replied helplessly. “What could I do?”

The spectral Hongjun and Lu Xu sat down on the wall, shoulders brushing, as the brilliant rays of the sun reached long fingers into the courtyard. Time sped by, and gradually, Hongjun felt a growing sense of familiarity, as if his memories were slowly returning.

Little Li Jinglong giggled as he taught Hongjun the Sogdian Whirl. They spun and stumbled around, bathed in sunlight, until Li Jinglong stopped and cocked his head. “What is it now?”

A voice was calling for Li Jinglong from outside. Hongjun took a step back. “Someone’s looking for you. You should go.”

“I’m not going,” Li Jinglong said, smiling at Hongjun.

Hongjun’s expression dimmed once more.

“Gege’s going to teach you how to play chuiwan.” Li Jinglong picked up a wooden stick and kicked at a ball.

The pair was halfway through their game when they heard Jia Yuze return. Hongjun clambered back over the wall while she searched the house for him. When it was time to part, he and Li Jinglong each clung to one side of the wall and stared at each other intently. Little Hongjun opened his mouth, then hesitated; after a spell, he turned and hopped down from the wall, running off without saying goodbye.

“If a seven-year-old child told you there was a monster inside him,” Hongjun said, almost absently, “would you believe him?” As Lu Xu started in surprise, he continued, brow creased, “A lot of little kids make up fantastical stories. No matter who they tell, no one would really believe them, right?”

After a moment of thought, Lu Xu said, “You think he’s already Di Renjie’s pawn?”

On the other side of the wall, Li Jinglong picked up the wooden stick used for chuiwan and put it away, then settled beneath the eaves with a book and resumed reading.

“No.” Hongjun shook his head. “Look at his eyes—there’s no deceit there.”

Lu Xu had also noticed this childish Li Jinglong was always smiling when he spoke to Hongjun. The grin that broke over his face the moment he saw the other boy transformed his countenance entirely. He remained content even after Hongjun left, and whenever he heard voices from the house next door, he couldn’t help looking up.

“Can you find the memory of when we first met?” Hongjun asked.

“I can try,” Lu Xu said, his voice low. He closed his eyes and tightened his grip on Hongjun’s hand.

Time flowed backward to a day in late autumn, when Kong Xuan's family first moved into the courtyard. The seven-year-old Hongjun had only just stepped down from the carriage when the nine-year-old Li Jinglong walked through the back alley carrying a bamboo tube filled with chirping insects. As he stepped over the threshold of his house, he glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of Hongjun standing beside the carriage, looking back at him in a daze.

Li Jinglong stopped dead in his tracks.

Little Hongjun stared curiously at the bamboo tube in Li Jinglong's hands. Neither said a word as time seemed to freeze.

"Chouxing!" Kong Xuan called from inside the courtyard.

As Hongjun hurried in after his father, a look of shock flickered over Li Jinglong's face.

Why is he so stunned? Hongjun wondered.

"He's stunned by your beauty," Lu Xu answered. The dreamscape was made up of Hongjun's subconscious; the moment Hongjun had a thought, Lu Xu sensed it.

"See how grubby he is?" Lu Xu pointed out. "Most kids look like that."

"Jinglong's family is rich," Hongjun said with a laugh. "His playmates can't be that bad."

Yet even Hongjun could see that as a child, his aura and appearance had been distinct from ordinary mortals'. As for Li Jinglong, he wasn't nearly as handsome as a child as he was now. Li Jinglong's mother had passed away when he was young; no one had spared much thought for his food and

clothing. It wasn’t until he reached his teens that he picked up the mannerisms of a young master, and only after joining the Longwu Guard did he gain the charisma and heroic bearing that came with his rigid self-discipline.

The boy they saw before them now was slovenly in both dress and manner, with a furtive air about him. This Li Jinglong seemed the opposite of likable, a half-grown brat prone to mischief.

“That was your first meeting,” Lu Xu said.

“Seems pretty normal,” Hongjun mused. “But we didn’t speak, so it doesn’t count.”

“Let me look again.”

Lu Xu closed his eyes, radiating light, and the scene was replaced with a crisp autumn day shortly after the Kong family moved to Chang’an. Little Hongjun, evidently bored, was rummaging through the boxes and other miscellany that remained piled in the courtyard. He dug up a book—the very same illustrated book on various yaoguai he would later give to Li Jinglong.

Lying back in a makeshift nest of cloth, he flipped through the book for a while before drifting off. Li Jinglong happened to be climbing the camphor tree in his family’s courtyard, intent on stealing eggs from a bird’s nest, when he turned his head and spotted Hongjun sound asleep in the warm autumn sun. The nest promptly flew from his mind, and he lay down on the branch, craning his neck to peer down at the boy below.

After watching Hongjun sleep a while, Li Jinglong called out, “Hey!”

When he received no response, Li Jinglong tossed down a pebble. This time, he succeeded in startling the other boy awake—but little Hongjun

merely shot him a wary look before scurrying back inside.

“That’s your first conversation,” Lu Xu said. “Also quite normal.”

Hongjun had imagined their childhood encounters would be marked by some sort of profound significance; he hadn’t expected them to be as mundane as any of the countless trivialities occurring across the world on most ordinary days and nights.

“What about the first time I spoke to *him*?” Hongjun asked.

“It’s probably…”

“I get it,” Hongjun said, exasperated. “Chances are, it’s completely normal as well. But I still want to see it.”

With another flash of light, they were once again looking at the courtyard wall.

Little Hongjun was gazing up at the cerulean sky on the other side of the wall. On the large gate of the courtyard, there hung a heavy lock. The boy pressed his ear to the gate, listening to the clamor outside. He had the forlorn look of a caged bird.

After listening a while, the child pulled out a grappling hook.

Lu Xu stared. Hongjun pressed a hand to his forehead.

“At that age, I was still digging up earthworms in the snow,” Lu Xu mused. “Meanwhile, you were already scaling walls.”

“Please stop talking…”

Little Hongjun threw out the grappling hook a few times without success, the hook clattering uselessly to the ground. Struck by a bolt of inspiration, he turned to try the same maneuver on his neighbor’s courtyard

wall. The roof tiles over the gate were too slick to find purchase, but he succeeded with the craggy courtyard wall.

He kicked off the wall and began to climb. It was a brilliant plan, using the barrier between their houses to sneak out. Just as he reached the top, panting, a head popped up from the other side.

Hongjun squawked in fright and reeled back, causing little Li Jinglong to yelp loudly in response—to think someone else had been climbing up the other side of the wall at the same time!

Li Jinglong's hand shot out, grabbing Hongjun before he could fall.

"What are you doing?!" Hongjun demanded.

"Fine, I'll let go," Li Jinglong said expressionlessly.

"Don't!" Hongjun cried at once. "Don't let go!"

"Call me Gege," Li Jinglong said, then added, "Your lips felt so soft when we kissed just now."

Hongjun's cheeks heated. The boy's face had been just an inch from his own, but he was sure there'd been no contact between them. "We didn't!"

"We did."

"Did not!"

"I'm letting go!"

Hongjun had never been bullied like this before. He promptly burst into tears. Clinging to the wall with one hand, Li Jinglong quickly said, "Okay, we didn't! We didn't!"

The moment Li Jinglong backed down, Hongjun conceded as well, tears streaming down his face as he sniffled. "Gege…"

Li Jinglong's face lit with happy surprise; he hadn't expected Hongjun to actually say it. He hauled himself up and threw a leg over the wall before pulling Hongjun up into a hug, earning another yelp. Then he scooped Hongjun up and, holding him to his chest, hopped down on the other side of the wall.

Hongjun and Lu Xu watched curiously from where they hovered in midair.

"Here, eat this. Stop crying…"

"Here, I'll give you a kiss too, don't cry…"

"Hey, hey, hey, c'mon, stop crying already!"

"I want to go home…" Hongjun whimpered.

"Try this first. I'll take you home after."

The sound of sobbing faded as Hongjun chewed on some unknown snack. Li Jinglong squeezed in beside him, and Hongjun pushed him away. The two children sat with their backs to the wall, shoving each other back and forth. Li Jinglong seemed to find the whole thing funny and began to laugh. "What's your name? You're Chouxing, right? Doctor Kong's son."

And after another moment: "Don't go. I have more, look—this is even more delicious than the last one. That's right, come back over here. I'll share."

The leaves of the camphor tree rustled beneath the summer sun. As time went by, Li Jinglong and Hongjun flickered in and out of sight in every corner of the Li family's backyard. Sometimes, they played chuiwan, while at others, they settled down before the pond to catch shrimp. When it snowed, they even built a snowman.

The courtyard wall that separated the Li and Kong families' residences was gradually demolished and replaced with a row of trees. At dusk, Kong Xuan would stand before the trees and call for Hongjun to come home. Hongjun would wave to Li Jinglong before heading in for dinner.

As soon as Hongjun left, the Li family's courtyard would grow desolate, their home completely empty save for one child.

"Where's his dad?" Lu Xu asked.

"Probably out on a military campaign," Hongjun responded. "Or maybe things are busy at the yamen. I think he mentioned his dad was a military official."

On those days, Li Jinglong returned to his room, where he ate a few pastries before lying down in the corridor to stare at the sky. Hongjun's mother's laughter floated over from next door. Listening carefully, he could hear Kong Xuan jokingly say that Hongjun looked like a plucked chicken. Li Jinglong couldn't help but laugh at the image.

The sky grew dark. Now Li Jinglong lay sick in bed, his forehead damp with sweat and his breath coming in harsh gasps. Hongjun slowly approached the ailing Li Jinglong through the gloom of the dimly lit room.

Li Jinglong couldn't seem to catch his breath even as he turned to look at Hongjun. "Mom… Dad…" he murmured.

Hongjun studied him, watching the laborious rise and fall of his chest. Then he pulled Li Jinglong into his arms, pressing their bodies together and listening to his heartbeat as he held him quietly.

"I'm so cold…" Li Jinglong said. "Where's…your dad?"

“He left on a trip,” Hongjun answered softly. “He’s been gone for a long time. Gege, what’s wrong with you?”

“I’m dying,” Li Jinglong said, his chest wheezing like a bellows. “Stay with me—don’t go…”

Hongjun hopped down from the bed and hurried out. When he returned, he was clutching a bag of medicinal ingredients. He sat right down on the floor and began preparing medicine for his patient. Li Jinglong opened his eyes, gazing blearily into the distance as he absently clenched his hand.

At last, Hongjun climbed back onto the bed to feed him the medicine. Li Jinglong’s face was white as a sheet, and his entire body was shaking. He gritted his teeth, but he couldn’t swallow; the bitter liquid flowed from the corners of his mouth and dripped onto the bed. Hongjun tried again, then again, but each attempt ended in failure. Li Jinglong breathed out but couldn’t draw in any air.

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Chapter 94:
Innocent Playmates

THE TWO BOYS stared at each other. Li Jinglong attempted to speak, but Hongjun pressed a hand to his chest. He lifted the bowl of medicine to his own lips to take a sip. Then, leaning forward, he sealed Li Jinglong's mouth with his own, feeding the bitter liquid to Li Jinglong using his lips and tongue.

The first mouthful was followed by a second, and a third.

Hongjun's eyes went wide as he watched his childhood self press close to little Li Jinglong, feeding him medicine.

"Your fever's breaking," little Hongjun murmured as he curled up against Li Jinglong. He fell asleep with his small arms wrapped around the other boy's waist, head tucked into the hollow of Li Jinglong's throat—exactly the way he did now when he slept with Li Jinglong as an adult.

Li Jinglong was still shivering, but as the medicine took effect, his breathing gradually evened out. He turned on his side and clung to Hongjun in return, whimpering in his sleep. Waking, Hongjun looked at Li Jinglong in surprise. The boy sobbed quietly in pain until he at last sank into a deeper slumber.

"Why is that kid always home alone?"

"You leave Chouxing locked up at home all the time as well."

"How is that the same? What kind of man gets transferred to Luoyang and doesn't bother bringing his son? If Xing-er hadn't happened across him,

he would have died of that cold. You men are all the same—you think that you can toss a child onto the ground and they'll grow, just like that."

"What does this have to do with me? Invite him over then, when you see him alone at home. Xing-er's lonely as well; this way he'll have a companion—isn't that a good thing?"

"We'll see. Kong Xuan, I just find it strange—that Li boy has no one to look after him. Apparently, he used to spend all his time loafing about in the streets instead of going to school."

"Mm, what about it?"

"Then why has that child been staying home every day ever since we moved in next door?"

"Maybe he likes playing with Xing-er. Stop being so suspicious all the time—how do you hear this stuff anyway? Yuze, you can lock him up now, but you can't lock him up for a lifetime. When he grows up, he'll inevitably come into contact with others."

"Li Jinglong!" Hongjun called out.

Li Jinglong had recovered from his illness, but he remained wan as he waited dazedly in the flower garden, holding a box of candy for Hongjun.

Hongjun climbed over the row of trees. Kong Xuan had promised to get rid of this final barrier to make it easier for the children to meet, but he'd been so busy he had yet to finish the task. Having overheard his parents' discussion of the Li family, Hongjun asked, "Why don't you go out to play anymore?"

Li Jinglong waved a hand. Hongjun didn’t understand; he tried asking again. “Why don’t you play with anyone else?”

“I don’t want to,” Li Jinglong said with utmost earnestness. “It’s more fun playing with you.”

Still puzzled, Hongjun plopped down next to Li Jinglong in the courtyard. Li Jinglong studied him carefully. “Do you want to go outside?”

Of course he did—but his parents had scarcely agreed to let him be friends with Li Jinglong. He could tell his father liked this boy, but his mother was still uneasy. She had told him time and again he could play if he liked, but he wasn’t to take a single step out of the house.

“I’ll take you out,” Li Jinglong said quietly. “Come on. It’ll be fine as long as we’re home before your mom gets back.”

Hongjun’s stomach twisted in a knot. Since he was born, he’d rarely spoken to anyone besides his parents.

“My mom said I’ll get stolen away by monsters if I go out.”

“I’ll protect you,” Li Jinglong declared. “I know how to use a sword.”

“Monsters can’t be defeated by an ordinary sword…”

“My sword has special powers! Don’t worry!” Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun’s hand and dragged him up. Hongjun hesitated, conflicted, but soon found himself being half carried out the door.

Horses and carriages swept past in an endless stream amid the hustle and bustle of city life. Along the streets, thousands of family homes rose toward the sky in a scene as peaceful and prosperous as heaven. Hongjun had taken only half a step out of the alleyway leading to his home when he jerked to a halt, stunned by the sight.

He had spent the ride into Chang'an fast asleep, and by the time he arrived, the sky had been dark. Seeing the flourishing scenery of Chang'an now, he could hardly stand to blink. Li Jinglong led him by the hand through a warren of streets and alleys. He stopped to buy snacks, handing them back to Hongjun without taking a bite himself. In the West Market, Hongjun spotted Jia Yuze selling her handmade perfume pouches. He watched people haggling with her as they picked through her wares, his face flushing with distress.

He saw the pharmacy where his father worked. Watching from afar with Li Jinglong, he observed that those who came to seek his father's help were all destitute commoners with nowhere else to turn. Kong Xuan looked up and met his son's eyes.

Oh no! thought Hongjun in a panic. Just as he was about to hide, his father smiled and gave him a wink, as if to say *Hurry home*.

As the sun sank toward the west, Li Jinglong swung a toy water pump in one hand and gripped Hongjun's hand in the other as he led him back home. Hongjun clutched a brush and a stack of paper to his chest, his prize from their outing.

"I have to start going to school tomorrow," Li Jinglong told Hongjun. "I won't be home during the day, but I'll be back as soon as school lets out." He sounded extremely reluctant, as if he was unhappy to leave Hongjun behind.

Hongjun had no idea what "going to school" was. It was only when Li Jinglong packed his bag and left the next morning that he realized what Li Jinglong had meant. There was nothing he could do but wait around in boredom within his family's courtyard until Li Jinglong came back.

The yellow leaves withered and fell as winter drew near. One evening, he brought up going to this “school” with his parents, prompting yet another terrible argument between Kong Xuan and Jia Yuze.

Hongjun feared his parents’ arguments greatly, for he always had a feeling they were because of him. After each fight, his mother, overwhelmed with sorrow, would hide away to shed tears where she couldn’t be seen, while his father would stare at him in silence with guilt written across his face.

When he was younger, he’d often fallen sick. Each time, he felt as though his heart had caught fire and would burn his entire body to ash. His parents had quarreled especially fiercely back then. Later—after several of Xie Yu’s visits—his health had gradually improved. Yet Jia Yuze never forgot how sickly he’d once been and continued to fear for her son.

“He’ll have to do these things eventually!”

“Kong Xuan! He’s just a child; he doesn’t understand anything!”

After this latest row, husband and wife settled on a compromise: Jia Yuze would teach Hongjun to read, and Kong Xuan would teach him to write—but this wasn’t what Hongjun wanted. He wanted to go to school with Li Jinglong, not pace the courtyard till the skies were nearly dark waiting for Li Jinglong to run home, rub his cheeks, and tell him, “I missed you so much.” On those days, Li Jinglong would only sit down to chat for a short while before slipping back over the trees.

On the eighth day of the twelfth month, by some miraculous stroke of luck, Hongjun, who had escaped to wander the city, found Li Jinglong’s private school. He clung to the windowsill and peered inside. The room was packed with children reciting their lessons in high, ringing voices. He

searched window by window until he at last spied Li Jinglong sitting at a desk at the back of one of the classrooms.

Li Jinglong was in the middle of a growth spurt. Within the past half year, he had shot up in height and was beginning to look less like a boy and more like a young man.

“Who’s that?” another child exclaimed in surprise.

Li Jinglong turned to look. Catching sight of Hongjun, he waited for his teacher to doze off before hastily crouching down and beckoning Hongjun over. Hongjun thought Li Jinglong would tell him to go home. But to his surprise, the half-grown Li Jinglong settled Hongjun down in the seat next to his own. His teacher didn’t seem to notice his new student when he opened his eyes, shook off his drowsiness, and resumed his lesson.

“Li Jinglong, who’s this?” another boy asked. “Your little brother?”

“My wife,” Li Jinglong said, pinching Hongjun’s cheek. It was Hongjun’s first time in a school, and he was curious about everything. He slapped away Li Jinglong’s hand and began flipping through the texts set out on the desk.

“Missed me?” Li Jinglong whispered into Hongjun’s ear with a chuckle.

Ignoring him, Hongjun continued sifting through Li Jinglong’s things, picking up each object and turning it over before putting it back on the desk. Li Jinglong’s maturing body was already more solid than his own small one, exuding a sense of safety and dependability.

After listening to the lesson a little longer, Li Jinglong leaned toward Hongjun’s ear again. “Did you miss me while you were at home?”

Hongjun's head was bowed over the desk as he flipped through a volume of the *Thousand Character Classic*, which was covered in Li Jinglong's annotations. "Mm," he hummed. Unsatisfied, Li Jinglong grabbed his wrist. He hugged Hongjun's arm to his chest as he stroked his fingers over the back of his hand, leaving Hongjun to flip through the rest of the books one-handed. After looking at everything, his eyelids grew heavy. Li Jinglong crossed his legs and allowed Hongjun to lay his head in his lap to take an afternoon nap.

From that day on, the young Li Jinglong lost any interest in learning. Studying was boring to begin with, and now he spent the majority of his time in school staring out the window until someone called out, "Li Jinglong! Your little wife's here!" Everyone would burst into stifled laughter as Hongjun snuck in through the back door, his head ducked and the hem of his robe dragging along behind him as he dodged the teacher's gaze and made his way past the students in the last row to sit beside Li Jinglong.

The other students took a great liking to this little interloper, but Li Jinglong rebuffed everyone who tried to talk to him. As for Hongjun, it was enough to have Li Jinglong; he had no inclination to make more friends.

One day, one of Li Jinglong's schoolmates gave Hongjun a box of rouge. Hongjun had no idea what it was. He merely shook his head, rejecting the gift.

"You don't know what rouge is?" the kid asked. "Wait a minute, you're a boy?!"

All of them had assumed Hongjun was the daughter of some noble family who had disguised herself as a boy to come attend class—that he was

really Li Jinglong's fiancée. To think this child was actually a boy! Everyone was dumbfounded by the revelation.

"Actually—isn't this Doctor Kong's son?" someone pointed out. "He looks just like his dad."

"Don't tell anyone!" Panicking, Li Jinglong made all his schoolmates swear not to reveal Hongjun's identity to anyone. Hongjun edged behind Li Jinglong, suddenly nervous. After all, aside from his parents, he knew only Li Jinglong. The attention of such a large group of children far exceeded his threshold for human interaction.

In the end, Li Jinglong managed to guard Hongjun's secret, but not before his schoolmates extorted a month's worth of his allowance by forcing him to treat them to food and drinks.

Later, after eating and drinking to their hearts' content, Li Jinglong's schoolmates pulled the smiling Li Jinglong aside and descended on Hongjun. "Who is he to you?"

Hongjun gazed at the other boys warily; he decided he didn't like hanging out with these kids anymore. Turning to Li Jinglong, he said, "Let's go home."

Li Jinglong beamed. "All right, let's go."

"Ooh—going home together are you?" The schoolboys couldn't resist heckling them. Li Jinglong ignored it; he knew Hongjun was scared of strangers, so he accompanied him home.

"What's that you're wearing?"

"Li Jinglong probably gave it to him."

“Xing-er, don’t accept gifts from other people. Do you understand?”

“Mm.”

Before, when the boys played together at home, they never saw any outsiders, so they didn’t mind being dirty and unkempt. But now that Li Jinglong was growing up, he became increasingly self-conscious. Aware that he was a descendant of nobility, he began to take more care with his own clothes—but he also grew particularly concerned with Hongjun’s attire. He would often dress the boy in strings of agarwood or white marble beads, jade waist pendants, agate hairpins, and ornamental thumb rings, along with a white scarf of unknown origin. Sometimes, before heading out, he would even urge Hongjun to change into his own hand-me-down clothes to ensure Hongjun’s wouldn’t be stained by ink and thus alert Jia Yuze to their secret outings.

As the weeks went by, more and more of the Li family’s bits and bobs appeared within the Kong family residence, as if Li Jinglong had moved half his possessions into their home.

Half a month later, Li Jinglong got into a row with his schoolmates. The other boys had gotten used to poking fun at the two of them; they hemmed Hongjun in and teased him, frightening him again. Eventually, Li Jinglong grew tired of their antics and told the leader of their little gang to back off. One thing led to another, and the shouting match devolved into blows.

Li Jinglong had only punched the other boy a few times, but the humiliation was too great for his schoolmate to bear; the boy insisted on a proper rematch. In the end, Li Jinglong flattened the ringleader in a few moves.

That would have been the end of it—had not his schoolmate, more mortified than ever, gathered a group of idle ruffians to ambush Li Jinglong and Hongjun on their way home, vowing to teach the little bastard a lesson.

It was a bone-chilling autumn evening when six young men beat Li Jinglong, a nine-year-old youth, into the ground with wooden cudgels. Hongjun couldn't stop shaking as he stood in the alleyway and watched blood stream from Li Jinglong's nose.

"*Let him go!*" Hongjun screamed hysterically. Li Jinglong swiped a hand across his nose and struggled to his knees, only to be laid flat by another vicious blow.

A sound like a clap of thunder exploded in their ears as a burst of demonic energy swept through the dim alley.

Even under the cudgels, Li Jinglong's eyes widened in shock. A long peacock's tail had materialized behind Hongjun. Black flames erupted from his eyes, and bloodred ripples blossomed in the air around him, spreading rapidly outward.

"Chouxing…" Li Jinglong struggled to his feet, as if in a dream.

As he hung in midair with a glowing Lu Xu by his side, Hongjun's pupils contracted, his body shaking as he gripped Lu Xu's hand in his own.

The howling column of black energy roiled as it expanded outward, and the ground quaked as the entire city of Chang'an began to sink. The streets splintered, and the houses cracked and crumbled with the force of mountains collapsing, of seas flowing in reverse.

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Yet in the next moment, a swirling, golden light began to radiate from the collapsing city—Goose Pagoda, the Department of Exorcism, Daci'en Temple, Baolun Pagoda, Sishui Terrace, and the astronomical observatory shone in the darkness, revealing an enormous six-point protective array that had barely withstood the black energy's destructive force.

"This is impossible!" Hongjun cried, voice climbing to a shout. "Why don't I remember any of this?"

"Hongjun, calm down!" Sensing this was a critical moment, Lu Xu gripped his hand harder. "Keep your mind steady!"

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Chapter 95:
Sealed Memories

VIOLENT DEMONIC energy burst from the young Hongjun. Li Jinglong crawled and stumbled toward him, leaving a trail of blood on the brick of the road.

He reached blindly toward Hongjun, who spread his arms and looked up at the boundless night sky. A writhing mass of black mist swirled within the heavenly and earthly meridians, funneling toward the center of Hongjun's chest. More black mist billowed at his back, as if a dark, colossal beast was trying to break free of the cocoon that was his body.

A figure swooped down from the sky. Kong Xuan's midnight-blue robes flared as he twisted in midair, transforming into a shining layer of armor. His muscular torso was fully covered by the gold-and-blue metallic scales as a winged helmet fashioned in the shape of a peacock materialized on his head.

He chanted, "The living are but transient guests; the dead are trav'lers homeward bound…"

A second deep voice rang down from the skies to join Kong Xuan's: It was the black jiao, slithering through the clouds. He recited the next line of the demon-sealing incantation: "Alas, the world is just an inn; everything dust in the wind."

"Seal!" Kong Xuan bellowed, fingers forming the Peacock Wisdom King Mahamayuri's seal. Wielding the pentacolor sacred light in his left hand and the immortal-slaying saber in his right, he merged them into one shining

weapon. Without hesitation, he brought the blade singing down on his son's head.

Mara had broken free; this Hongjun did not fear Mahamayuri in the slightest. Wreathed in black fire, he let out a rasping growl. Flames shot toward Kong Xuan, and golden blood ran from his body. Despite his heavy injuries, he persisted in suppressing Hongjun's demonic energy.

"All that converges… Gather!" The black jiao Xie Yu coiled and twisted in the air, transforming into Yang Guozhong. Little Hongjun hovered above the shattered brick of the alley, his back arching as tendrils of dark flame shot from his body like comets hurtling across the night sky, streaking toward Yang Guozhong. Yang Guozhong reaped the black flames, absorbing the demonic energy that surged without end.

Kong Xuan dove toward Hongjun, his hands glowing as he brought them together to form the Mahamayuri mudra, which he pressed to his son's forehead.

Immediately, the dark flames winked out, and the whirling mass of demonic energy dissipated into the wind. Kong Xuan caught Hongjun in his arms as he plummeted toward the ground.

The young Li Jinglong sat stricken. He looked at Yang Guozhong, then at Kong Xuan. Yang Guozhong sneered as he took out an hourglass with a golden dragon coiled around it and shook it gently.

Time flowed backward in a miraculous display: The houses of Chang'an that had been demolished by Mara's flames were repaired in a blink, brick and stone falling neatly back into place.

Li Jinglong stumbled toward Kong Xuan, who spoke no word of reprimand. He glanced at Yang Guozhong, then nodded, motioning for Li

Jinglong to follow him. “Can you walk?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Li Jinglong answered.

“Just hang on a little while longer.”

“Is Chouxing…?”

“He’s fine. Now now, don’t cry.”

“Doctor Kong… Why is your blood—”

“Don’t ask.”

That night, Jia Yuze and Kong Xuan conversed in hushed voices till dawn. Li Jinglong, having taken his medicine for his internal injuries, kept watch beside an unconscious Hongjun’s bed. They left the boys alone; only after the sun rose did Jia Yuze enter, heaving a sigh. When she saw Li Jinglong fast asleep beside the bed, holding Hongjun’s hand, tears cascaded down her face.

Hongjun still hadn’t risen when it was time for breakfast. It took several kind reassurances from Kong Xuan that his son would be fine before Li Jinglong managed to nod and sit down to eat with them.

Jia Yuze looked at Li Jinglong and sighed again. “I know the two of you spend a lot of time together. Xing-er has always been lonely, so thank you for being his friend.”

Li Jinglong had thought the Kong family destitute, but upon careful observation, they weren’t poor in the typical way. Though they had very little, they didn’t seem to struggle for necessities.

“Are you all immortal?” Li Jinglong asked.

Jia Yuze shot Kong Xuan a look. Neither answered.

“Is Chouxing immortal too?” Li Jinglong pressed. “He told me there’s a monster inside his body. Is it true?”

“Chouxing must maintain a peaceful heart and mind,” Jia Yuze said. “Li Jinglong, you must ensure he doesn’t experience any strong emotion. He must be devoid of wants and desires to keep the heavenly demon in his heart suppressed.”

Kong Xuan sighed. “For you, Jinglong, this matter would be easily resolved if I simply sealed your memories—but it’s different for Xing-er. You might forget about him, but he’ll never forget about you. I fear I must ask you for a rather large favor.”

Li Jinglong’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Devoid of wants and desires,” Hongjun echoed to Lu Xu.

“With desire comes suffering,” Lu Xu explained. “Since the moment you were born, the demon seed of Mara has been ceaselessly absorbing the malign energies of the mortal world. The lonelier and more distressed you became in your childhood, the faster those energies overtook you.”

“Then…how did the demonic energy in me disperse?” Hongjun asked.

Lu Xu contemplated this before answering. “It dispersed, but it didn’t truly vanish.”

Hongjun nodded. “Xie Yu absorbed it.”

Lu Xu hummed in agreement. “Malign energies are inherently drawn to the demon seed. They flow toward it the way rivers course to the sea—and this demonic energy inside of you is precisely what Xie Yu is after.”

“What does he want it for, though?”

“This energy can manifest as spiritual power and fortify one’s cultivation base. Didn’t you notice? You unleashed such massive power. Thanks to the demonic energy you’d absorbed, you demonstrated at the age of seven a level of strength others would have to cultivate hundreds or even thousands of years to attain.”

Now Hongjun understood. “Chong Ming once said that when one cultivates to a certain level, they’ll ascend to immortality.”

“Xie Yu has cultivated for two thousand years, but he still can’t transform into a dragon,” Lu Xu said. “He needs more power to breach that threshold.”

The young Hongjun recovered within a few days, but he had no memory of what had happened that night. The last thing he recalled was Li Jinglong protecting him while being beaten up by a gang of thugs.

As soon as he woke up, he got a scolding from Jia Yuze. His parents and Li Jinglong had jointly agreed upon a story: They told him he’d been knocked out during the fight, and that Li Jinglong had carried him home. After delivering her lecture, Jia Yuze sent Hongjun to visit Li Jinglong with some medicine for his wounds to keep Hongjun from overthinking things. After all, this would only bring about more complications.

The two boys settled on Li Jinglong’s bed so Hongjun could apply the medicinal paste to Li Jinglong’s back. “Does it hurt?” he asked.

Li Jinglong was naked save for his underpants, revealing the raw wounds crisscrossed over his back. As Hongjun spread the salve, Li Jinglong

craned his neck to look at him. He seemed to hesitate, as if he had something important to say.

“I took a nasty beating for you,” he said at last with a smile. “Don’t you think you should give Gege a kiss?”

Hongjun set the medicine down. He put his arms around Li Jinglong’s neck and leaned closer to peck his cheek.

Li Jinglong immediately flushed crimson. Hongjun, on the other hand, appeared unaffected. Looking back down, he scooped out another spoonful of medicine and tapped Li Jinglong’s side, instructing him to turn so he could tend to the bony expanse of his back.

The moment he turned away, Li Jinglong’s eyes widened, and his breath quickened.

“You’re so skinny,” Hongjun said. “Skinnier than my dad.”

“No way!” Li Jinglong objected. “I’m strong—look!” He turned to the side and stretched out his arms for Hongjun, showing off his childish muscles. “I beat six people up all by myself, and they had sticks!”

Humming agreeably, Hongjun spread more medicine on each extended arm. Li Jinglong’s gaze slid down his wounded arms to land on Hongjun’s face. Their eyes met.

Hongjun blinked. Tilting his head, Li Jinglong leaned forward gently; Hongjun mimicked him in confusion, still holding the bowl.

Moments before their lips brushed, Li Jinglong came to his senses and turned his face aside, touching the small of his back. “Here too.”

As soon as Hongjun finished applying the medicine, Li Jinglong shooed him off home. But Hongjun insisted on staying—he didn’t want to

leave Li Jinglong alone.

“Go home and spend time with your mother.”

“But you’re going to school tomorrow, so I won’t get to see you.”

“I won’t go to school anymore,” said Li Jinglong, whose body truly was strong for his age. “When I grow up, I’ll join the army.”

And it was just as he said: Li Jinglong really did stop attending class from then on. Instead, he spent his days at home with Hongjun. When winter at last arrived in full force, Li Jinglong’s father returned, but all he did was sit in the house, drinking an excessive amount of wine.

At Kong Xuan’s suggestion, the two families celebrated the new year together. That winter brought the heaviest snowfall in a hundred years. Cottony drifts of snow blanketed the grounds, the roofs, and the rear courtyard. Kong Xuan and Li Jinglong’s father chatted idly over tea in the front hall, while Hongjun and Li Jinglong wrapped dumplings with Jia Yuze. Li Jinglong’s jokes sent Jia Yuze into peals of laughter.

Once again, Lu Xu felt their surroundings ripple. “Hongjun?”

Hongjun was on the brink of losing control. At this moment, he wanted nothing more than to go back in time. He would pay any price to return to that winter, to this night, when he, his parents, and Li Jinglong were all snug within his home together.

“I want to go back,” Hongjun said. “Lu Xu, help me.”

The last time he’d entered these dreams, his consciousness had been in his own younger body. This time, thanks to Lu Xu’s intervention, he experienced these dreams as an outsider, merely watching from above.

“Sweet dreams are like fine wine,” Lu Xu cautioned. “You can have some, but not too much.”

Hongjun turned imploring eyes toward Lu Xu, who nodded and let go of his hand. Instantly, Hongjun became a ray of white light that shot into the small body of the Hongjun in the dreamscape.

“This is your dream, not your past.” Lu Xu’s voice rang in Hongjun’s ears. “Don’t try to change anything, and don’t think too hard about how this is a dream, or you’ll wake up before you intend to.”

In the next breath, Hongjun stood beside his mother, still laughing at Li Jinglong’s latest quip. Seeing her sweet smile, Hongjun instinctively leaned closer to her—he wanted nothing more than to throw his arms around her and hold her tight.

Noticing her son’s distraction, Jia Yuze swiped a handful of flour over his face. Hongjun yelped, and she laughed again at the sight of him. “Mom!”

A snickering Li Jinglong went to fetch a towel to wipe Hongjun’s face. Jia Yuze pinched Hongjun’s cheek and bent to kiss him on the same spot. She wrapped an arm around him, and he buried his face in her waist.

In the waking world, Lu Xu released Hongjun’s hand and opened his eyes to find Mergen and Li Jinglong looming expressionlessly over him. Lu Xu looked up at them warily.

“What did you show him?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Nothing much,” Lu Xu replied.

Li Jinglong sat on the bed. Hongjun’s face was relaxed in slumber, the corners of his mouth turned up in an innocent smile, as if he was immersed in

the sweetest of dreams. As Li Jinglong reached out to caress his forehead, Lu Xu quickly said, “Don’t rouse him, or he’ll beat you up.”

“Send me in there,” Li Jinglong said.

“I can’t. You can only enter his dreams if you’re in them.”

Li Jinglong studied Lu Xu. With a smile, he asked, “And how do you know I’m not?”

Observant as ever, Li Jinglong had guessed Hongjun’s dream had something to do with him the moment he saw Lu Xu’s hesitation. With a sigh, Lu Xu pointed at Hongjun’s hand, which Li Jinglong took. As he lay down beside Hongjun, Lu Xu shaped his fingers into a seal and pressed his hand against Li Jinglong’s chest. The white deer’s powers took hold, and the heart lamp’s gentle glow enveloped the two dreamers on the bed.

After stuffing himself with dumplings, Li Jinglong spent the first night of the year in Hongjun’s home. The boys lay down side by side, whispering to each other in bed. Li Jinglong took Hongjun’s hand in his own, and Hongjun turned over to snuggle up to him. “What does ‘joining the army’ mean?”

Li Jinglong’s eyes widened as his adult waking consciousness slipped into Hongjun’s dream.

“It means…” Li Jinglong tilted his head, observing the young Hongjun in shock. His eyes roved around the room. *Where are we?*

Hongjun, exhausted after a whole day of fun, was soon fast asleep. Li Jinglong looked down at the small boy in his arms. With his fair complexion

and rosy lips, Hongjun as a child was almost prettier than he was as a young man.

Footsteps sounded outside—likely Kong Xuan. Li Jinglong squeezed his eyes shut just as the door opened. Kong Xuan gently slipped two red envelopes beneath their pillows before pausing above Li Jinglong.

Opening his eyes just a crack, Li Jinglong saw Kong Xuan make a strange sign with his hands, perhaps some sort of spiritual technique. He flicked his fingers, and a sigil flew toward Li Jinglong and sank into his heart.

Li Jinglong waited until Kong Xuan had left, then tiptoed out of bed. It seemed he'd returned to his childhood. Two sets of new clothes for the New Year festivities were folded neatly on the table. He pulled one of them on and padded out the door, examining his surroundings.

If this was his past, he had no memory of it. What was going on?

Li Jinglong was stunned. This was Hongjun's dream, of that he was sure—but why would *he* appear in a dream about Hongjun's childhood? *Does Hongjun know what I looked like as a child?*

Outside, the snow had stopped. Li Jinglong walked out into the courtyard, only to stop short at the sight of the camphor tree reaching up over the walls of the residence next door. Was this Hongjun's dream or his own?

Voices sounded in the entrance hall: Kong Xuan seeing Li Jinglong's inebriated father out. Kong Xuan was about to turn back when he spotted a figure in the alley.

"Well, come in then," Kong Xuan said, stepping back to make way for Yang Guozhong.

Jia Yuze gave Yang Guozhong a wary look as she cleared the table. Arms full of dishes, she left them, shutting the door lightly behind her. As soon as she was out of sight, Li Jinglong snuck closer, hiding in the corridor to peek through the door she'd left ajar.

"Have you thought it through?" Yang Guozhong asked grimly. "This is the only way to save him."

"If we save him, the world will be destroyed," Kong Xuan said.

"Where there is light, there is shadow; where there is good, there must be evil," Yang Guozhong replied. "Today we live in an age of peace and prosperity, yet there will surely come a day when demons make their return. It is because of all living things that malign energy exists in this world, and hence this energy must someday return to those that created it. This calamity is written in the fate of the Divine Land, inevitable. Why do you not understand this?"

Yang Guozhong tilted his head slightly with these last words, his gaze fixing on Li Jinglong, hovering outside, through the crack in the door. Startled, Li Jinglong instinctively shied back before remembering this was Hongjun's dream and not reality. But then, how had the dream Yang Guozhong seen him? During these original events, had someone else peeked through these doors at this exact moment?

"Your son holds nearly three-tenths of the world's malign energies within him. I'm doing my best to gather the rest." Yang Guozhong took a sip of tea. "Entrust him to me, and he'll be rid of this demonic energy in less than ten years. When the time comes, you can seal Mara, and your son will emerge alive."

"And what about you?"

Yang Guozhong smiled.

“You only want to save Xing-er’s life for your own sake,” Kong Xuan said coldly. “After you absorb the demonic energy inside him, you’ll fear no one, and be free to do as you please. Who in this world will be able to stop you when the time comes, Xie Yu?”

“Is the demonic energy more dangerous once it seeps into my soul, or after your son has absorbed it? Very soon, I will transform into a dragon. I’ll be able to control it. If Chouxing descends into demonhood, on the other hand, he’ll be far more difficult to rein in. Think carefully.”

“If Chouxing someday becomes the heavenly demon,” Kong Xuan vowed solemnly, “I’ll put an end to him myself—and the mistakes I made along with him.”

“Then you must act quickly.” Yang Guozhong thought a moment, then added, “Even *you* will be no match for him once he absorbs the other seven-tenths of the world’s malevolent energies.”

“The divine kun is gathering energy from the sun and the moon of the North Sea for me. He hopes to reconstruct the heart lamp.”

“The heart lamp is useless to you,” Yang Guozhong said. “It doesn’t belong to the yao race.”

“Someone will inherit it eventually,” Kong Xuan replied evenly.

“You’re thinking of the Chen family?” Yang Guozhong sneered. “If Chen Zi’ang’s descendants were capable of *that*, the heart lamp wouldn’t have ended up in pieces in the—”

Time seemed to stutter as Li Jinglong’s surroundings rippled subtly, almost unnoticeably. Both Kong Xuan and Yang Guozhong froze.

Li Jinglong took a hasty step back, realizing that the original witness to this scene had arrived.

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Chapter 96:
Eve of Departure

LI JINGLONG STARED at Hongjun. Despite the snow on the ground, the boy was clad only in a thin robe. Hongjun looked back at him in silent confusion.

"Go back inside." Li Jinglong stepped forward and grabbed his hand. "You'll catch a cold."

"Who's visiting?" Hongjun asked.

It took Li Jinglong only a moment to put together the events of the evening. "My dad," he replied.

The Li and Kong families had just had dinner together, so it was reasonable for Li Jinglong's father and Kong Xuan to share a drink after the children went to bed. Hongjun cast his suspicions aside.

"Go back to bed." Li Jinglong put an arm around Hongjun and guided him toward his room.

Hongjun tried to struggle free. "I can't fall asleep!"

On this festive occasion, many children were still awake, staying up through the night to greet the new year. Hearing the loud pops of their firecrackers in the distance, Li Jinglong shushed Hongjun. "Shh. The nian beast[6] is coming."

"I've never seen it before. What does it look like?"

Li Jinglong suddenly had an idea. "Let's go. We're going out for some fun."

He led Hongjun across the line of trees and back into his own home, where his father was already snoring. Grabbing some of his outgrown clothes, he waited for Hongjun to change into them before taking his hand and leading him out to the stable, where he borrowed a horse. He mounted first, then pulled Hongjun up behind him.

“I’ve never ridden a horse!” Hongjun yelped as he clung to Li Jinglong’s waist.

Li Jinglong laughed. “I’ve just learned recently myself!”

Hongjun didn’t know what to say.

Li Jinglong turned the horse’s head toward Ximing Temple. The monks there were preparing for the first prayer ceremony of the year, when they would welcome the common people of Chang’an as they came to pay their respects to the Buddha. The two boys slunk into the rear courtyard, where they found a wooden ladder—the monks hadn’t put it away after hanging up the golden prayer flags flying in the wind—and clambered up to the roof of the temple. Balancing on the roof tiles, they gazed eastward over Chang’an, the city aglow in the darkness as it waited for the new year to begin.

“Look.” Li Jinglong pointed toward the sea of lights.

“Wow.” Hongjun marveled as he sat on one of the golden flags, flattened like a blanket against the roof. Taking advantage of his distraction, Li Jinglong leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Hongjun assumed, at this moment, that the nine-year-old Li Jinglong beside him was still his own memory of the boy from his past. Unable to restrain himself, he leaned closer and kissed Li Jinglong square on the lips.

Li Jinglong flushed scarlet, and Hongjun scooted back with a smile. “I’m moving away soon. Do you think we’ll ever see each other again?”

“I do,” Li Jinglong replied with certainty. “I’ll wait for you. I know you’ll come back to Chang’an one day.”

Hongjun stared at Li Jinglong in surprise. “Perhaps I’ll never come back again.” Emotions surged over him like the tide. He blurted, “That monster will swallow me whole someday. When the time comes—”

“It won’t,” Li Jinglong said firmly.

“It’s my fate.” Hongjun hugged his knees, staring out at the cityscape of Chang’an without truly seeing it. “The demon seed in me absorbs all the malign energies of the world, and someday, they will turn me into a demon. But if we let Xie Yu absorb them instead, it would be even more disastrous. Jinglong, promise me, if I become Mara—”

“I said you won’t,” Li Jinglong repeated.

Hongjun turned to look at him, stunned.

“Don’t be scared. I won’t let the monster break free, no matter when or where it happens. Wait for me, Hongjun. I’ll study spiritual techniques properly so one day—”

The instant Li Jinglong called him *Hongjun*, he realized something was amiss. *How does he know that name?*

The nine-year-old Li Jinglong grabbed seven-year-old Hongjun’s shoulders, leaned down, and kissed him.

Hongjun’s dreamscape warped and shifted. As the wind picked up, the world expanded without end, and their bodies lengthened and grew bigger—

He opened his eyes, waking in Li Jinglong's arms. Realizing the person lying beside him was no longer Lu Xu, he flinched back, staring at Li Jinglong in shock.

Li Jinglong met his gaze, his brow deeply furrowed. "We…knew each other when we were kids?" he murmured. "Hongjun, what happened? How… how could I have forgotten you?"

Hongjun shook his head slowly. Li Jinglong pressed him, urgent now, "Was that your past? Hongjun! Tell me!" He refused to relent even as Hongjun pushed him away. "Hongjun!"

Summer had just begun. Under the dimming evening sky, the fragrance of orchids wafted on the breeze.

Mixed emotions churned in Lu Xu as he strode out onto the balcony on the second floor of Lanling Amber. The West Market was closed for the day, and the evening drums had begun to sound, heralding the arrival of nightfall.

Mergen was crouched like a wolf on the balcony, watching the sunset, when footsteps sounded behind him. He didn't need to ask to know it was Lu Xu. "Did you help Hongjun enter his dream? I was about to wake you two."

Lu Xu hummed an affirmative—he'd barely spoken to Mergen since their fight the other day. He settled his arms on the railing, looking into the distance beside Mergen.

"What did you see?" Mergen asked.

"Is that any of your business?"

"It's just…he's like a younger brother to me," Mergen said, almost to himself.

Lu Xu swallowed the mocking words on the tip of his tongue. After a long silence, he gazed down at the marketplace bathed in the sunset's glow and said thoughtfully, "I saw a child who was very lonely…"

He turned to fix his gaze on Mergen's crouched silhouette. As he watched little Hongjun and Li Jinglong, a complicated emotion—equal parts envy and melancholy—had risen in him. He had once been even lonelier than Hongjun. After coming of age, he'd been sent to Sha Prefecture and entrusted to the garrison commander. As an untidy, half-wit kid, he had been bullied everywhere he went.

"What was your childhood like?" Mergen asked suddenly.

Lu Xu didn't answer. He thought back to that snowy night in Yulin on the northern border—to the moment when he opened his eyes to see Mergen's glowing palm pressed to his forehead.

"Hey, idiot, where do you think you're running off to?"

"He's completely useless, but he runs fast, I'll give you that."

"Do you even know where you're running to?"

His world had been a blur, nothing but a vast expanse of white through which he ran and ran, striving toward a destination that did not exist. And yet he kept running, as if there was someone waiting for him at the end of this boundless world. If that person wouldn't come to him, he thought, he might as well go to them. But he had traveled the entirety of Hexi, never stopping long for any reason, and still had no idea whom he was looking for.

Mergen looked back at Lu Xu. "I'm sorry…"

Lu Xu frowned. He arched a brow, motioning for Mergen to spit it out.

“I’m sorry I didn’t figure it out earlier,” Mergen said. “But I… I’m not like the chief. I thought I—but… It’s my fault, so don’t be mad.”

Lu Xu was utterly confused. After much deliberation, Mergen continued, “I thought the gray wolf and white deer must be… But—”

“Get to the point,” Lu Xu snapped.

Mergen considered his words carefully, his back still to Lu Xu. “Hongjun’s right. If that…isn’t possible, maybe being friends is the best thing.”

“Hongjun and I *are* good friends though,” Lu Xu said. “What are you overthinking for, you stupid wolf?!”

Mergen turned to face him, gesticulating at the space between them as he said awkwardly, “I’m talking about you and me.” Met with Lu Xu’s silence, he quickly explained, “I always thought the gray wolf and white deer should be husband and wife, so I… I… I’m sorry for being presumptuous.” He couldn’t seem to look Lu Xu in the eye. He turned away again, muttering, “It’s all my fault…”

“Yes, it is,” Lu Xu said. “And I’ve never had feelings for you either.”

Mergen breathed a sigh of relief. “Great. I don’t have any improper intentions toward you, Lu Xu.”

Lu Xu scoffed. “Well, this was completely pointless.”

Mergen scratched his head. By the time he opened his mouth again, Lu Xu was already stalking away.

Stunned, Mergen thought to chase after him, but he’d already disappeared down the stairs. For some reason, Mergen felt a touch of guilt and dismay, as if he’d unwittingly hurt Lu Xu.

The evening drums had stopped. Wading through the chatter downstairs, Hongjun exited the tavern.

“Stop asking,” he said as Li Jinglong trailed after him. “I’m not telling you!”

“Are you leaving?” Lu Xu swept down the stairs as swiftly as the wind, carrying Hongjun’s packed bag. He tossed it to Hongjun, who secured it to his horse’s saddle.

Li Jinglong glanced around. Finding only Lu Xu, he said, “Don’t bother the others. We’re heading out of the city.”

“Be careful,” Lu Xu said to Hongjun, who nodded and mounted his horse. Mergen, still standing by the eaves on the second floor, whistled down at them.

“I’ll leave Chang’an to all of you!” Li Jinglong called up to him.

Mergen raised two fingers in a salute as Li Jinglong set his heels to his horse’s sides. Hongjun had already ridden off, leaving Li Jinglong behind.

The carp yao scampered out holding a wok and spatula. “But you haven’t even had dinner!”

“You always do this,” Li Jinglong shouted as he chased after Hongjun. “Can’t you stop running away?”

Hongjun slowed his horse and turned back to look at Li Jinglong. “I’ll stop if you promise not to ask.”

“Fine,” Li Jinglong conceded. “I won’t ask a single question until you’re ready to tell me about it.”

Satisfied, Hongjun at last allowed Li Jinglong to come up alongside him. It was past curfew in Chang'an. The city was on high alert, but the order for Li Jinglong's arrest hadn't spread beyond the Longwu Guard. They were fortunate; perhaps Li Longji had decided on a more merciful approach on Yang Guozhong's advice. If Li Jinglong had been formally prosecuted for deceiving the emperor, there would be no going back.

Li Jinglong led them toward the city's eastern gate, where he showed his token to the sentries. A moment later, a flurry of sneezes rang out as he tossed out a sprinkle of oblivion pollen. He opened the gates himself, and he and Hongjun shot out of the city.

Only when they were surrounded by the vast, uninhabited plains did they gradually slow their pace, Hongjun still in front while Li Jinglong took up the rear. Hongjun turned back to glance at Li Jinglong from time to time, remembering the night Li Jinglong had chased him out of Dunhuang in the snow.

The moon poured its light over the green rice fields by the roads, which rustled as the wind blew. Li Jinglong had stopped trying to catch up to Hongjun once they were out of the city. Hongjun reined his horse to a halt, waiting for him, but Li Jinglong stopped as well, maintaining their distance.

"What's with you?" Hongjun called.

"What do you think?" Li Jinglong replied curtly.

Hongjun fell silent. "Let's go," he said.

Li Jinglong's eyes were alight with anger. Hongjun knew he was upset, but he stood firm nonetheless. He had his own reasons for not telling him.

Learning the truth would only make Li Jinglong upset, and what was the point in that?

“I don’t want to tell you because—”

“Stop,” Li Jinglong said. “I promised I wouldn’t ask.”

“Let’s go, then.” Hongjun steered his horse back around.

They rode a while longer. Hongjun quickly found himself flagging. Leaving the city at night meant they were less likely to be arrested, but this overnight ride was taking its toll on him, and Li Jinglong riding so far behind made it worse.

“Let’s find somewhere to rest for the night,” Hongjun called. “I’m tired.”

There was no response from behind him. Hongjun tried again. “How about that village up ahead?”

He looked beseechingly back at Li Jinglong. He wanted to mend things after refusing to tell him about the dream, but he didn’t know how.

“You always say I don’t tell you anything,” Li Jinglong said. “But you do that too. Have you ever thought about how I feel?”

“It’s different.”

“How so?”

“You promised you wouldn’t ask.”

“I’m not asking. We’re talking about something else entirely now, aren’t we?”

Their gazes met. Li Jinglong’s brows were drawn low; he was obviously still cross. Hongjun urged his horse forward and grabbed his hand.

“Don’t be upset.”

“How will you make it up to me, then?”

Hongjun had no idea how to cheer someone up. He usually resorted to telling the truth, but that wasn’t an option right now. He studied Li Jinglong. “What do *you* want me to do?”

“Later, when we’re alone—I want to go the rest of the way.”

Hongjun nodded. “Okay.”

They rode in silence a while longer, Li Jinglong now only a few paces behind Hongjun. Hongjun turned back to look at him. Noticing that his stormy expression had cleared somewhat, he said, “We’re alone now.”

“What can we possibly do out here in the middle of nowhere?”

They journeyed onward until they arrived at a village just as dawn was breaking. Beyond the village, a pier packed with people and boats stretched into the river.

“Why aren’t we riding?” Hongjun asked. “Won’t it be faster if we follow Hangu Road?”

“The relay stations around Hangu Pass are full of An Lushan and Yang Guozhong’s spies,” Li Jinglong replied. “We’ll be spotted immediately.”

At this time of the year, the ships traveling the Wei and Yellow rivers only carried goods, not passengers. He motioned for Hongjun to wait while he talked to a bowsman standing beside a cargo ship. After some agreement was made, Li Jinglong walked the pier and stopped to purchase a small box, which he tucked into his lapels. He then took out a handful of silver and told Hongjun to lead their horses aboard, warning him not to speak.

Pocketing the silver, the bowsman led them toward the stern of the ship. “Travel by boat is slower than horseback, but the journey will be a smooth one. Rest well, sirs; feel free to call for me if you need anything. Follow the cabins all the way down—your quarters are at the very end there.”

It was Hongjun’s first time aboard a ship, and he was fascinated by everything. This ship, which carried a sizable load of cargo, was a refurbished dragon boat originally built for Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty. After the first emperor of the Tang dynasty ascended the throne, the Li family had wanted to burn Emperor Yang’s fleet of over a hundred ships. Only the intervention of Wei Zheng, a trusted official, saved the vessels. At his suggestion, the late emperor’s dragon boats were refitted into cargo ships used to transport goods and merchandise. During Emperor Yang’s reign, carpenters from all over the nation were enlisted to build these ships from wood of the highest quality. Although they’d required occasional repairs in the century that followed, they nevertheless remained miraculously intact and could still sail up and down the Yellow River.

The massive ship they’d boarded had six floors. It was loaded full of wares unsuited to bumpy carriage rides, such as grain, wine, and ceramics. The stern was occupied by an enormous cabin with six windows, a wide bed pushed against one wall, and a folding screen that separated the chamber into an inner and outer area. A carpet covered the floor in the outer area, atop which sat a table with an incense burner. This cabin was presumably intended for the use of imperial officials tasked with supervising certain shipments.

“This room’s so—” Hongjun had just stepped inside when Li Jinglong pulled him into a bruising kiss.

“Let me look around first!” Hongjun said, quickly extricating himself. He clambered onto the bed—noting a large mirror beside it—and opened the windows one by one. Outside, the sky was beginning to brighten, and goods were being loaded onto the ship. He left the windows open and pulled down the gauze curtains, admitting a refreshing breeze into the room.

Li Jinglong turned to latch the door and shed his outer robes and bracers. After sitting on the bed, he couldn’t wait even a second longer; he pushed Hongjun down and whispered, “Hurry up. I want you so much I could die.”

Hongjun had no idea how to respond as Li Jinglong pulled him into his arms. “I’m still mad,” Li Jinglong said. “What are you going to do about it?”

Laughing, Hongjun cupped Li Jinglong’s cheek in his hand and kissed him. Li Jinglong fell silent, eyes wide, as his breathing quickened. Hongjun’s lips moved clumsily against his own, his inexperience evident, but blood rushed so quickly to Li Jinglong’s head he felt dizzy. He pinned Hongjun to the bed and kissed him back.

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Chapter 97:
Young Love

HONGJUN CLUTCHED at Li Jinglong's back as he almost suffocated under his kisses. Li Jinglong caged him in, fitting his long, trouser-clad legs between Hongjun's. Both of them were already aroused. Li Jinglong impatiently began to peel off his own clothing before reaching for Hongjun's collar.

Immediately, Hongjun was nervous again. "Don't—"

"I've already seen everything." Li Jinglong gazed down at Hongjun's collarbones peeking out of his clothes, then looked up, staring deeply into his eyes. "What are you still so shy for? I know you want Gege too—I can tell from the way you look at me."

Li Jinglong pulled Hongjun up from the bed and led him to stand on the carpet. He stepped back and finished removing his robes, baring his sturdy chest. He yanked his belt off next, and his pants fell to the floor, leaving him naked before Hongjun.

Hongjun was briefly stunned. Li Jinglong was strong, lean but muscular. He had a trim waist and beautifully defined abs, and the monstrosity between his legs—already leaking after prolonged arousal—was an astounding sight. Hongjun's eyes raked over the powerful physique of the man in front of him. Li Jinglong had the body of a warrior, with musculature as perfect as a leopard's, and the shaft between his legs was thick and heavy with need. He stood there, unabashedly naked, growing even harder under Hongjun's gaze.

“Take your clothes off,” Li Jinglong said. “All of them.”

Heart pounding, Hongjun loosened his collar to reveal his chest, then removed his belt. Standing just a step apart, they stared at each other’s bare bodies.

Hongjun was youthful and slender, yet showed a considerable amount of strength in the lean lines of his legs and torso. With his fair skin and defined collarbones, he made a lovely picture. Under Li Jinglong’s hungry gaze, he had already become fully hard. His wasn’t as thick as Li Jinglong’s, nor as long, but he was still quite masculine.

They drank in the sight of each other until Li Jinglong broke the silence. “Come here.”

Hongjun stepped forward, and Li Jinglong caught his hand, pulling him into his arms. He turned them aside until they were facing the mirror. In that bright reflection, their bodies were pressed close, with nothing between them. The sight made Hongjun dizzy. He buried his face in Li Jinglong’s shoulder, then tilted his head slightly, peeking again at their images.

“Still shy?” Li Jinglong asked, voice low.

Hongjun was—but after enduring the thorough scrutiny of Li Jinglong’s gaze a moment ago, he suddenly felt there was no point in hiding. Li Jinglong dragged his hands down Hongjun’s chest and abs before wrapping his fingers around his burning arousal. Hongjun flushed at his touch.

“Why aren’t you touching me?” Li Jinglong said.

Breath quickening, Hongjun took Li Jinglong’s cock in hand. He heard Li Jinglong ask, “Like it?”

Hongjun nodded. Li Jinglong swept him off his feet and laid him back down on the bed, hands braced on either side of him as he gazed down at Hongjun. Hongjun couldn't resist arching his back to press himself closer. Last time, Li Jinglong had unerringly sought out Hongjun's most sensitive spots as he stroked him to climax. Hongjun had etched that night into his memory and revisited it countless times since.

"Touch me," Hongjun pleaded softly, hoping Li Jinglong would do the same again.

"No." Li Jinglong refused stoically. "Why should I? Always asking Gege to touch you—I didn't know you were so needy for it."

Hongjun flushed crimson. But in the next moment, Li Jinglong did something that nearly gave him a nosebleed—he took himself in hand and pressed his thick cock to Hongjun's, rubbing against him. This felt even better than Li Jinglong's hand; the sensations were more direct, more powerful. Hongjun moaned.

"Is Gege big?"

"Yes…" Hongjun's abs were smeared with wetness, though whether it was his or Li Jinglong's, he couldn't tell. All he knew was Li Jinglong was on top of him, and they were kissing without a moment's pause, lips and tongues intertwined. Hongjun clung to Li Jinglong as they gasped for breath, yearning to hold each other so close they merged into one.

Hongjun was nearly at his limit. He splayed a palm on Li Jinglong's chest and pushed him away to catch his breath. As he quietly studied Li Jinglong's handsome face, he couldn't help but recall his dream, where both of them were kids. He reached out to caress Li Jinglong's cheek, feeling as if

the decade that had gone by since the events of that dream had passed in one snap of his fingers.

“What are you thinking about?” Li Jinglong asked.

“You.” Hongjun laughed, then wound his arms around Li Jinglong’s neck and drew him down into another kiss.

When they next broke apart, Li Jinglong asked in a low voice, “Can I put it in?”

Hongjun blinked, perplexed. *Put it in? Put it in where?* “What?”

“In you,” Li Jinglong said in a whisper. “I want to be inside you.”

Abruptly, Hongjun remembered those acts Li Jinglong had described in detail as they staked out the brothel months ago. Embarrassment once again washed over him—but this time, it was laced with pleasure. He couldn’t have described how it felt even if he’d wanted to; at that moment, words escaped him.

He nodded, swallowing hard. Li Jinglong asked again, “Will you let me?”

“O-okay.” Hongjun’s nerves hummed with apprehension—yet beneath that was a secret anticipation, as if he was about to experience the fullest expression of Li Jinglong’s love for him.

“But how do we do it?” Hongjun touched the considerable length of Li Jinglong’s cock; it seemed like an impossible endeavor.

Li Jinglong climbed off the bed and rummaged through the garments strewn over the ground until he found the small box he’d bought in the marketplace near the pier.

“What’s that?” Hongjun asked.

“Grease.” Li Jinglong scooped up a few fingers’ worth and wiped it on Hongjun’s palm. He motioned for Hongjun to close his hand around his cock and lubricate it. “Be generous.”

The flush on Hongjun’s cheeks spread all the way to the base of his ears. He greased Li Jinglong from head to hilt, measuring his approximate length with his spread fingers—at almost a foot long, he was enormous.

Li Jinglong at last began to feel bashful as he reached a hand between Hongjun’s legs and smeared the remaining grease over his entrance. “Please take care of me,” he teased.

Hongjun burst into laughter at the unexpected quip. Li Jinglong wrapped his arms around him, pressing their foreheads together, and said affectionately, “Try to bear with me.”

“Go on, then.”

Li Jinglong was painfully hard. He positioned himself between Hongjun’s legs and pushed in, stretching Hongjun open.

Hongjun yelped at the unexpected spike of pain. “Ow…it hurts!”

“Just hang on a minute longer—”

“No way! It hurts too much!” Hongjun cried out again, and Li Jinglong slowly pulled out.

Hongjun felt like he’d been about to split open. As he brooded in silence, Li Jinglong laughed. “It’s fine. We can try again next time.”

“Why does it hurt so bad?!”

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Li Jinglong kissed his cheek. He looked somewhat resigned, as if he'd foreseen this.

"Is it this painful for other people too?" Hongjun asked.

"I haven't done it with anyone else," Li Jinglong said, unsure whether to laugh or cry. "How would I know?"

Even now, the pain had yet to fully fade. Hongjun demanded, "Did we do it wrong?"

"Is there anywhere else I can put it?"

Hongjun thought he had a point. Indignant now, he said, "Again. Let's try again."

Taking Hongjun into his arms, Li Jinglong obediently pushed in again. But it still hurt so so *so* much, practically torture—

He quickly begged Li Jinglong to show him mercy. This only woke a new kind of hunger in Li Jinglong—hearing him plead, he suddenly wanted to ravish him thoroughly. But he couldn't bear to treat Hongjun roughly; he pulled out again.

"Sorry," they both sighed in unison.

Hongjun laughed. "What are *you* sorry for?"

"I'm too big," said Li Jinglong. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"No, you're great as you are—I really like it."

Their first attempt was officially a failure. Li Jinglong's arousal flagged as he sat down on the bed, dejected. Hongjun straddled his lap and pressed a kiss to his lips as he reached down, whispering, "I like it so much. I mean it. Ever since the first time I saw you naked back in Huaqing Pool."

Li Jinglong's cock was long and thick, a manifestation of his masculine strength—it was only natural that a young man like Hongjun would admire it.

"So you do like them big," Li Jinglong murmured as he kissed up Hongjun's neck.

Hongjun retaliated by dropping kisses on Li Jinglong's sensitive ears, and Li Jinglong soon grew hard again. He wrapped an arm around Hongjun and pressed him down into the bed, bucking his hips against Hongjun's body.

Sliding his arms around his back, Hongjun let Li Jinglong's solid weight bear down on him. He exhaled slowly. "Maybe it'll fit after it's gone a bit softer."

"It won't." Li Jinglong's breathing was labored. He couldn't enter Hongjun, but it was arousing enough to have such a beautiful young man in his arms, their bare bodies rubbing against each other. Hongjun ran heated palms over his back, waist, and ass, stoking the flames of his arousal. After rutting against each other like this for just a few minutes, Li Jinglong came, spilling across Hongjun's stomach.

"Ah!" Hongjun ran a hand down the front of his body, feeling the stickiness pooling on his abs and chest.

"Sorry," Li Jinglong said as he tried to catch his breath. "Couldn't hold on."

Hongjun was still rock-hard. He sniffed Li Jinglong's spend, then blushed as he realized what he'd done. Li Jinglong swiped his fingers through the mess on Hongjun's stomach and put them in his mouth to taste himself.

"Don't!" Before Hongjun could stop him, Li Jinglong leaned down and captured his lips in an open-mouthed kiss, feeding Hongjun his come.

Hongjun was utterly speechless.

“Swallow it,” Li Jinglong said with a chuckle. “I can’t come inside you, but at least we can do it like this.”

Cheeks heating under Li Jinglong’s steady gaze, Hongjun obeyed. Li Jinglong smiled. “Good boy,” he said, and pressed in to kiss him again.

Hongjun still hadn’t come. After exchanging another round of breathless kisses locked in Li Jinglong’s embrace, he was desperate for release. “I wanna…”

“What do you want?” Li Jinglong teased.

“Wanna come.” Hongjun forgot his shyness. “Let me rub against you.” He reached down for the monstrosity between Li Jinglong’s legs.

“Should I try putting it in again?” Li Jinglong’s cock was already beginning to stir again with interest. After coming once, it wasn’t quite as hard as before.

As Hongjun hesitated, Li Jinglong promised, “I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt.”

Finally, Hongjun nodded. The pain of the previous two attempts had somewhat receded, and Li Jinglong moved with extra care. He positioned himself at Hongjun’s entrance, then stopped and bent down, closing his mouth over Hongjun’s nipple.

Looking up, he asked in a low voice, “Where do you like to be touched?”

His words sent a thrill through Hongjun, but they shamed him too. Enduring the ache in his rear, he whispered, “Right there, where your mouth is…”

“Do you know my favorite place to be touched?” Li Jinglong murmured.

Hongjun’s chest was heaving. Though Li Jinglong had come just a few minutes ago, his cock was still massive. When it pressed into Hongjun, it hurt so much he could barely breathe.

“It’s also this place right here, just like you,” Li Jinglong whispered. “And also this part down here, that’s pushing inside you.”

Hongjun’s throat bobbed. “It—it hurts…” He knitted his brows as he felt himself split open around Li Jinglong, trying to endure the pain.

“The head just went in.” Li Jinglong paused and pulled out slightly before pressing in again.

“Don’t move! It hurts!” Hongjun yelped.

Li Jinglong stopped. He kissed Hongjun again before pushing his hips forward a little more. The stretch was more bearable this time, but it still felt like torture. Indignant, Hongjun thought, *This is supposed to feel good?!*

Suddenly, the ship lurched. Li Jinglong lost his balance and pitched forward, plunging into Hongjun, who screamed.

The ship had set sail!

The deep thrust brought tears to Hongjun’s eyes. Li Jinglong hadn’t expected to be helped along by the ship’s motion, either. Seated securely inside Hongjun, he gasped, “The ship moved. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I…” Hongjun froze. “Is that all of it?”

“No… Just half of it. Does it still hurt?”

In truth, Hongjun had felt an agonizing burst of pain when Li Jinglong entered him, but it had quickly subsided. After a few deep breaths, he found it

tolerable. “It feels…okay.”

Li Jinglong began to thrust slowly. As he built up a rhythm, Hongjun felt a strange sensation laced with the pain. Li Jinglong’s cock rubbed against his inner walls with every motion, and when he drove in deep enough, it ground against something inside him. He felt a pressure, like he needed to piss but couldn’t.

As Li Jinglong pushed in deeper, Hongjun moaned in discomfort.

“Feel good?” Li Jinglong looked down at Hongjun’s flushed face and the tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He felt his scalp tingle with pleasure and his blood rush faster in his veins.

“It… It feels so weird…” Hongjun closed his eyes. Those strange sensations surged through his body without cease, like the ocean’s waves.

“Does it really?” Without pausing, Li Jinglong reached down for Hongjun’s cock, and Hongjun realized—he had become hard again after Li Jinglong began to move. Hongjun palmed himself, and Li Jinglong’s hand covered his, stroking him as he continued to thrust. Hongjun’s own shaft curved upward toward his stomach, rock-hard and leaking as Li Jinglong drove into him.

“Looks like it feels pretty good to me.”

Broken moans left Hongjun. He had no idea how to describe what he was feeling. It was totally different from when they had embraced naked, their bare skin sliding against each other. Li Jinglong was invading him with his massive cock, shooting sparks up Hongjun’s spine and accelerating the onslaught of uncontrollable sensations coursing through him.

“Hey.” Li Jinglong looped an arm around Hongjun’s waist and gazed into his eyes. “What’s got you so excited all of a sudden?”

“I… I’m not,” Hongjun gasped.

Li Jinglong held him tighter. “Call me Gege.”

“Ge—Gege…” Hongjun whimpered.

Li Jinglong rolled his hips slowly. “Does it still hurt now?”

Hongjun couldn’t speak to answer. “Do you like it?” Li Jinglong pressed. “Do you like being fucked like this by Gege?” He brushed his lips against Hongjun’s in an achingly tender kiss.

Every one of Li Jinglong’s motions seemed to declare his love for Hongjun, converging in a pleasure that filled him to the brim. His emotions surged so high he felt he would lose himself. He said between moans, “I do… *Ah!* What is this feeling… I can’t take it anymore!”

“Just focus on that feeling,” Li Jinglong murmured. “That’s my love for you.”

Li Jinglong caught his lips in a fervent kiss. As his pace quickened, Hongjun found himself shaking; he couldn’t make a sound, not even to moan. His cheeks were wet with tears before he realized it. Li Jinglong rocked into him a few times, sending waves of pleasure crashing over him. Overwhelmed, he clung to Li Jinglong’s back.

Noticing the state of him, Li Jinglong paused so Hongjun could catch his breath. He gazed down into his eyes and whispered, “It feels good when I kiss you at the same time, doesn’t it?”

Hongjun panted. “You… You’re…shameless. You’re bullying me.” Li Jinglong was worse than a beast in bed.

“You don’t like it?” Li Jinglong studied Hongjun, his eyes shining with love and affection. “If you don’t like it, I’ll stop.” Li Jinglong pulled back until only the tip remained in Hongjun.

“I like it,” Hongjun said. “I—I want more.”

“Say it,” Li Jinglong murmured. “How do you want me to bully you?”

“P-put it in me…” Hongjun flushed to the roots of his hair as he said those words.

“And then what should I do?” Li Jinglong kissed the shell of Hongjun’s ear.

Finally Hongjun melted, moaning, “Fuck me harder…”

Li Jinglong drove in deep again.

“Ah!” Hongjun cried out, his voice trembling with shock and pleasure. His breathy pants and whines fed the animalistic desire simmering in Li Jinglong; he tilted Hongjun’s chin up and kissed him hungrily once more. He thrust unforgivingly, madly, and Hongjun whimpered into his mouth, clutching Li Jinglong’s firm, muscular arms as he wrapped his legs around his waist. Li Jinglong didn’t stop for even a second, fucking into him over and over until Hongjun broke their kiss to keen loudly, his body racked with tremors. He felt like he was about to piss himself.

“I can’t!” he cried. “*Ah—!*”

What spilled from him wasn’t piss, but come. Pleasure shuddered through him as the dam broke, his twitching cock covering his chest in a mess of his own spend. As his climax took him, he clenched tight around Li Jinglong, drawing a low moan from him.

Hongjun felt it when Li Jinglong came inside him. Experiencing such pleasure together brought a deep satisfaction, like being submerged in a pool of love.

When they had both gathered themselves, Li Jinglong heaved a long sigh. He propped himself up on his elbows and kissed Hongjun again.

Hongjun was exhausted; his body felt limp, and the flush had yet to recede from his neck and chest. He stared dazedly up at Li Jinglong, who said, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Hongjun said softly, gazing into his eyes.

“I love you.”

“I know.” Hongjun began to laugh.

“I love you!” Li Jinglong declared. “I love you, you hear me?” His expression was a mix of exasperation and joy; he looked so young right now, like he’d gone back in time.

“I know!” Hongjun answered. He pressed a hand against Li Jinglong’s chest. “Pull out.”

“No.” Li Jinglong flatly refused, rendering Hongjun speechless. Instead, he embraced Hongjun and pushed in deeper.

Hongjun was quick to beg for mercy. “No, no—that feels weird!”

“I won’t move,” Li Jinglong said. “Just let me hold you like this.”

After two failed attempts, Li Jinglong had finally managed this maneuver successfully—he was reluctant to pull out, lest Hongjun refuse him the next time he tried. Now that he’d come down from his climax, Hongjun wanted nothing more than to rest a minute, yet Li Jinglong refused to detach himself.

“Do you love me or not?” Li Jinglong demanded.

Resigned, Hongjun stopped protesting. Fortunately, Li Jinglong had softened significantly after coming twice. As long as he didn’t move, it was all right. Li Jinglong shifted onto his side and draped Hongjun’s leg over his waist as he pulled him close, angling his hips to sit more snugly inside Hongjun.

After panting for a while, Hongjun felt his heart begin to slow. Li Jinglong pressed a kiss to his lips. “Let’s have a chat,” he suggested.

“About what?” Hongjun asked, wondering how he could convince this clingy bastard to let him go for a bit.

“Say you miss me, something like that,” Li Jinglong replied. “Do you like Gege more now?”

Hongjun caressed his face. “I do.”

They had been so lost in their own desire that only now did they realize —they seemed to have done something quite scandalous.

“Marry me, then?” Li Jinglong asked earnestly. Hongjun’s breath quickened. Li Jinglong said, “If you don’t reply, I’ll take it as a yes.”

At the same moment, Hongjun felt Li Jinglong stiffen inside him again.

“Pull out,” Hongjun begged. “You’re hard again.”

Gripping Hongjun’s hips to keep him in place, Li Jinglong flipped them so that he was once again pressing Hongjun down into the bed. “First promise me you’ll be my wife.”

Hongjun’s eyes went wide. Li Jinglong started thrusting again, brooking no refusal. Hongjun had only come once; he felt an instant surge of arousal again. “O—okay,” he stuttered.

Li Jinglong wrapped his arms around him, pressing chest to chest. “What should you call me?”

“What should I call… *Ah!*”

Li Jinglong considered briefly. “I still prefer ‘Gege.’ Call me that.”

“Ge—Gege.” Hongjun was once again drowning in pleasure. Exhausted and overstimulated, he whined, “No… No more!”

Li Jinglong pulled him upright, then lay back on the bed so Hongjun was straddling his hips. “Do it yourself—unless you’re too tired and don’t want it.”

Hongjun sat up straight and reached behind him. He was shocked to discover only half of Li Jinglong’s cock was inside, despite how deep he was. Shivers raced up his spine. He did want Li Jinglong to pull out—but he felt empty without that heat inside him. Unable to resist, he lowered his hips, letting that massive girth fill him to the brim.

Li Jinglong chuckled. “Want more?”

As Hongjun warred with himself, Li Jinglong said, “If you want it, then take it. Do it yourself.”

Face flushed, Hongjun furrowed his brow as he hovered over Li Jinglong’s hips. He could feel the head of Li Jinglong’s cock bumping against that spot in him that made his scalp tingle. Li Jinglong nudged Hongjun’s legs wider and gripped his waist, instructing him to rock lightly atop him. Hongjun cried out—in this position, Li Jinglong’s length pressed directly against that spot, grinding mercilessly. A few moments were all it took for violent tremors to overtake him, and he moaned loudly, begging for mercy.

Li Jinglong motioned for Hongjun to turn around so they were chest to back, facing the mirror. His cock was still inside Hongjun as he repositioned himself to take him from behind. “Look up,” he said.

Hongjun glimpsed their reflections. Shame rose in him at the sight of his spread legs, erect cock, and Li Jinglong’s girth stretching him from behind, and he turned his face aside. “Don’t—don’t do that.”

After another kiss, Li Jinglong asked softly, “Can Gege put all of it in?”

Before Hongjun could answer, he snapped his hips forward, burying himself to the hilt.

Hongjun’s eyes went round. He could feel Li Jinglong’s cock pierce him through, pressing snug against the deepest part of him, as if on the verge of forcing something open.

“Don’t!” Hongjun wailed. “It’s too deep… No—wait!”

Li Jinglong held his breath, and Hongjun panted, not daring to move. He felt like some unknown place inside him had been breached as Li Jinglong drove in, impaling him to the core. Almost all of Li Jinglong’s length was inside him now. His belly ached, but in the next instant he felt a strange surge of pleasure.

Seeing Hongjun jerk upright, taut as a bowstring, Li Jinglong grew nervous. “Does it hurt?”

Hongjun couldn’t name what he was feeling. He gasped out, “It’s too deep!”

Li Jinglong began to rock his hips slowly. Hongjun sobbed; an inexplicable sensation surged over him as Li Jinglong filled him to the brim.

He no longer felt simple pleasure when Li Jinglong's cock rammed against that spot; instead, he felt electricity arc through him as Li Jinglong forced him open, lighting his nerves on fire and driving him out of his mind.

To Li Jinglong, it seemed as if Hongjun had given himself over to him completely. He didn't dare move too violently; he fucked Hongjun gently, listening for every gasp and moan. Gaze slack, Hongjun tilted his head to look at Li Jinglong, his lips lightly parted and his eyes glassy, as if overcome by a dizzy spell. Seeing him like this, Li Jinglong couldn't resist kissing him fiercely.

Neither knew how long they went on this way until Hongjun moaned, "I… I'm gonna come."

The jut of Li Jinglong's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Together," he murmured. "I'll give it to you—I'll give you everything."

Li Jinglong quickened his pace, and Hongjun came first, spilling pearly fluid onto the sheets. Li Jinglong scooped up his come and pressed his fingers to Hongjun's lips, and Hongjun, barely conscious, sucked them clean. The sensation tipped Li Jinglong over the edge, and he spilled inside him.

At last he gingerly pulled out, his breathing coming in heavy pants. Stomach aching dully, Hongjun complained, "You went too deep."

"I won't next time." Li Jinglong, upon returning to his senses, thought he'd gone overboard as well. He gathered Hongjun into his arms and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you too," Hongjun said. In those final moments, he had entrusted himself entirely to Li Jinglong, holding nothing back. Even now, he shuddered lightly as wave upon wave of lingering passion washed over him.

“Look out the window,” Li Jinglong suggested. “We’ve left Chang’an.”

“I’ll pass.” Hongjun buried his face in Li Jinglong’s chest. “I’m so tired…”

“Do you want to put it inside me too?” Li Jinglong asked softly, arm snug around Hongjun. “I’ll do anything for you. It doesn’t matter who’s in what position.”

Hongjun burst out laughing. He nuzzled into Li Jinglong’s chest, peeking at him one-eyed with the gaze of a man drunk on love. Li Jinglong brushed his lips against his cheek and pulled the blankets over them.

“Not right now,” Hongjun said.

“Mm.” Li Jinglong kissed him again and again. The ship sailed gently down the Yellow River, rocking Hongjun into a sound sleep.

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Chapter 98:
Two Birds with One Stone

WITH LI JINGLONG and Hongjun safely away, the remaining members of the Department of Exorcism continued to operate out of Lanling Amber. When Li Heng summoned them to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review for interrogation the next morning, the court still hadn't gotten wind of Li Jinglong's departure from the city. Under questioning, the exorcists all gave the same answer: They had no idea where the fugitive was, or if Hongjun was with him.

Li Heng guessed at once that Li Jinglong had set out to find the truth, hoping to clear his name. But with Yang Guozhong steering the opinions of the court, the matter of Li Jinglong's escape was suppressed for the present.

"What next, though?" Ashina Adarvan asked. "The chief didn't give us instructions on how to proceed before he left."

Mergen considered this. "An Lushan is staying in the barracks on the northwest side of the city with his army. The first thing we should do is infiltrate and locate the spiritual device he's using to protect himself."

They had planned through the night following Li Jinglong's departure. A-Tai gave everyone the gist of what Li Guinian had told him, leaving out the true significance of the sacred flame and its importance to his order. Mergen pondered for a long time, then spread out a map on the table. "You suspect this sacred flame is the spiritual device An Lushan is using? If that's the case, we should take the risk and infiltrate the barracks. I doubt it'll be easy to

locate, though. We'll need to buy ourselves some time. I have an idea, listen…"

This was the first time Li Jinglong had left his subordinates to their own devices while facing a foe—and they were facing An Lushan, of all people. All the exorcists were capable in their own right, but they'd become used to acting on Li Jinglong's orders without thinking too much about it. The chief was an exemplary strategist who left no stone unturned, and so they were happy to simply do as he said.

Now that their boss was gone, the planning was left to them. Inspired by Lu Xu and Hongjun's adventure in Hongjun's dreams, Mergen spent the whole night deep in thought and emerged the next morning with a strategy consisting of a complicated chain of operations. He expected everyone to clap and praise his ingenuity, but to his surprise, they all fell into an awkward silence.

"That's way too dangerous!" A-Tai said at last. "What are you thinking?! You could die!"

"We have no idea what this demon is capable of," Qiu Yongsi added, "and this is our first time going against it."

"Don't you remember what happened when Lu Xu was possessed?" Mergen replied. "It's not like I'm going off nothing… Lu Xu!"

Lu Xu was on the second floor, leaning against the railing as he looked outside. He said indifferently, "Don't ask me. I haven't the slightest clue."

"Are you sure about this? You'll definitely die," Ashina Adarvan said.

"Yeah, I think Third-in-Command's a goner," the carp yao agreed.

Lu Xu glanced at Mergen, who was still trying to reassure everyone. “We’ll be fine as long as we nail the timing.”

“I’ll do it.” Lu Xu hopped over the railing, jumping down to join them. “I’ve been through it before.”

Mergen objected at once. “No, no! Lu Xu, I need you to be the one controlling the threads.”

“You trust me so much?” Lu Xu asked.

Mergen pressed his lips shut. He turned to the rest of the group. “Any other objections?”

“Yes!” everyone cried in unison. “Come up with something else!”

“You guys figure it out, then.” Mergen threw up his hands, exasperated.

Lu Xu narrowed his eyes, studying Mergen. “You’re really serious?”

“Of course I’m serious.” Mergen looked at everyone, perplexed.

“Adarvan and I will do it,” A-Tai said. “We grew up together; we share a stronger bond than you two.”

“Neither of you have the power to manipulate dreams,” Mergen said.

“So what?” said Ashina Adarvan. “Have Xiao-Lu enter Tigra’s dreams and wake me up when it’s time.”

“Stop right there,” said Mergen. None of these ideas would work as well as the one he’d already proposed. “The gray wolf and white deer already possess these powers. And I believe in Lu Xu.”

Everyone lapsed into silence again. “All right,” said Lu Xu. “I’ll go with you, but it still might not work. My antlers were cut off; my powers are

weaker now. Don’t blame me if this fails.”

Mergen and Lu Xu gazed at each other across the room. Qiu Yongsi spoke up: “If this fails, we’ll have no choice but to wait for the chief and Hongjun to return, then force you awake.”

This made Mergen hesitate. But after a moment, he shook his head. “I’m confident. Yongsi, monitor Yang Guozhong carefully. I’m guessing he won’t wait until the noble consort’s birthday. If we succeed in stealing the sacred flame from An Lushan, Yang Guozhong will immediately move to recover his soul. At that point, An Lushan is sure to forget everything else and seek us out.”

“Leave Yang Guozhong to me,” Qiu Yongsi said. “When it comes to subduing dragons, I have my own methods. We just need to place a seal on the sacred flame. It’s complicated, yes—but not impossible.”

The carp yao looked at them in astonishment. “Aren’t you guys a bit too ambitious?”

Originally, they had only planned on investigating the whereabouts of An Lushan’s protective spiritual device, but Mergen wanted to take the opportunity to subdue Yang Guozhong as well. The plan was risky in the extreme, but even after brainstorming for hours, no one could think of a better one. Everyone preferred to spring into action rather than to sit around idle, so each took up their respective tasks.

A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan were in charge of monitoring An Lushan’s every move. The moment Mergen located An Lushan’s spiritual device—which they now felt sure was the sacred flame—they would swoop in and grab it. If they succeeded, Yang Guozhong would notice immediately and come for An Lushan.

Under threat from Yang Guozhong, An Lushan would surely try to snatch the device back from them. When that moment came, Qiu Yongsi would create an imitation of the sacred flame. He would feign an injury and let An Lushan take the fake, then leave An Lushan to confront Yang Guozhong. When both were wounded from their clash, Qiu Yongsi would activate the seal he'd cast, and everyone would come together to eliminate both An Lushan and Yang Guozhong, killing two birds with one stone.

Mergen was immensely satisfied with this plan, finding it perfect in every way. As he returned to his room with Lu Xu, ready to begin the first stage, he asked, "Do you really think it's too risky?"

Lu Xu gave Mergen a conflicted look. "You're actually pretty smart."

"Lots of people are smarter than I am," Mergen said casually, lying down on the bed. "The chief is so smart the rest of us rarely get to show off our skills… What should I think about?"

"Think of the moments in your past etched deepest in your memories —something you can't cast aside," Lu Xu said. "You need to pick a memory you wouldn't forget, even if you were marching to your death. It can be an obsession, your sweetest dream, memories of love or hatred. But you must be sure you can recall this memory no matter where you are, no matter how much time has passed."

Mergen nodded and shut his eyes. Lu Xu pressed a palm to Mergen's forehead and began to recite: "In the dreamscape of the manifold universe, where fantasy and illusion hold sway, your heart alone holds truth."

White light burst from his hand, bathing Mergen's forehead in its soft glow.

Mergen felt a strong gale buffet him. On the boundless plains, thousands of blades of grass, caught in the wind, flew up toward the azure sky. A young boy was running across the plains, stumbling over his feet as armored cavalrymen clashed around him. Warhorses trampled a Shiwei village, which was soon enveloped in a sea of raging flames.

“Mama!” The village burned behind him as the boy searched through the wreckage, wailing in sorrow. Lying lifeless amid ruins was the burnt-black corpse of a woman, still warm to the touch…

Lu Xu flinched back with a gasp, his breath quickening.

Mergen opened his eyes. He looked up at Lu Xu and winked mysteriously. “You’re the only one who’s seen that. Don’t tell anyone else.”

Lu Xu was at a loss for words. Mergen took his hand and placed it back on his brow, and the white light bloomed once again.

Young Mergen tore across the plains on the back of a wolf, the rest of the pack loping behind him. The Milky Way cascaded like a waterfall across the night sky as he looked toward the horizon; amid those glittering stars, the white deer bounded toward him from the heavens…

It was a long time later when Mergen woke again. Lu Xu retracted his hand and gazed deeply at Mergen, as if stunned.

“Done.” Mergen exhaled a long breath. His head throbbed slightly as he sat up and descended into a thoughtful silence.

“Who was that?” Lu Xu asked.

“My mother,” said Mergen with a smile. “You saw her too, right? She was a beautiful woman.”

Lu Xu couldn’t connect that burnt body to the mother who existed in Mergen’s memories, no matter how he tried. “What happened?” he asked uneasily.

“My father wasn’t there when my mother gave birth to me. I grew up in the Arghun tribe. On the day I was born, they said, all the wolves on the plains prowled over, surrounding the village.”

A deep furrow appeared between Lu Xu’s brows. Mergen peeled off his outer and inner robes, baring the tanned expanse of his chest, and changed into the garments of coarse cloth set out on the table. As he faced the mirror to tie his belt, he met Lu Xu’s eyes in the reflection. “My mother told me I was born covered with fur, which I gradually shed. She thought I was a yao’s failed reincarnation. The elders of my tribe saw me as a monster. After the Arghun tribe was slaughtered, I left the northwest plains near Wolun Lake and traveled to Shiwei with my mother’s token, hoping to find my father. An elderly shaman in the tribe insisted I was the gray wolf’s reincarnation. He told me to journey to Hengshan Gorge.”

“But Hongjun told me you have four younger brothers,” Lu Xu said.

“We all have different mothers,” Mergen explained pleasantly. He held his hand up, palm down. “The youngest is just this tall.”

Mergen was always smiling; Lu Xu hadn’t expected such a tragic past to be lurking in his dreams.

“That’s why I should go,” Mergen said, following Lu Xu’s train of thought. “The heavenly demon should be quite interested in my past.”

“Did you find the people who murdered your mother to avenge her?” Lu Xu asked.

“Let’s go.” Mergen said, looking away. “Change into these clothes, and we’ll head out together.”

The ship swayed as it sailed out of the Wei and onto the waters of the Yellow River, which raged as heavy winds blew. Hongjun spent a whole day and night recovering from their activities. Li Jinglong, too, had slept from noon till daybreak the next morning with Hongjun clasped in his arms. When Hongjun at last rose and stretched his limbs, he realized Li Jinglong had been awake for some time, and was watching him with a grave expression.

“Are you okay?” Hongjun asked.

“Are *you* okay?” Li Jinglong returned. “Do you feel any pain?”

That third round, when Li Jinglong had pushed too deeply inside him, had brought some slight discomfort, but other than that, Hongjun felt wonderful. He had never imagined this could feel so euphoric. Now he knew why they said lust was dangerous—what he had done with Li Jinglong was simply irresistible.

The experience had affected him both body and soul, and he quite wanted to try it again—but he feared his body simply couldn’t take it right now. When the tides of passion had receded, he and Li Jinglong had embraced each other, spending slow moments kissing and caressing, and this, unexpectedly, had made him understand even more profoundly that emotion called love.

As he examined Li Jinglong’s face, Hongjun thought he looked a bit wan after going at it thrice the previous day. “What about you?” he asked. “Why do you look so pale?”

“You’re joking. Do I look like I’ve exhausted myself? Wanna go again?”

Hongjun hastily pleaded for mercy, suggesting they wait at least until the next day. He pushed Li Jinglong’s groping hands away, laughing. “I liked the last time the most, but it made me a bit sore. Where did you learn that stuff?”

Li Jinglong caught Hongjun’s hands and pressed them to his own chest, giving him free rein to wander over that warm expanse of skin. “From some erotic drawings.”

Hongjun pondered that for a moment. Li Jinglong kissed him again before getting up from the bed. “I’ll go fetch us some food.”

“I’m not hungry. Doze with me a while longer.”

“Be good now. I’ll let you cling to me as much as you want after you have some food in you. We have three more days until we arrive in Luoyang, after all.”

Despite Li Jinglong’s repeated attempts to coax him, Hongjun refused to let go. He flicked his tongue lightly over Li Jinglong’s lips, then one nipple. His teasing advances froze Li Jinglong in place.

“Look, you’re not even getting hard anymore.” Hongjun closed his fingers around Li Jinglong. “We shouldn’t go multiple rounds next time.”

“Actually, it’s because—” Hongjun watched in confusion as Li Jinglong’s expression turned queer. He resisted a moment longer before blurting, “I can’t—I have to get up.”

Pushing Hongjun away, he jumped out of bed, pulled on pants, and rushed out the door, sprinting barefoot up the staircase while Hongjun

watched, perplexed, from the bed.

The sound of retching came from the deck above.

Hongjun was flabbergasted. No way—was doing *that* really so bad for the body?

On the deck, Li Jinglong was puking his guts into the sea, knuckles white on the railing. Hongjun, clad only in pants as well, ran over to him. “It’s my fault—are you okay?”

Li Jinglong fell into a sullen silence. Hongjun ran a soothing hand over his back, assuming he’d caught a cold. Li Jinglong said calmly, “Fetch me some water.”

“Next time, we really shouldn’t—”

“No, no, no, listen, it’s not because of that… Blerghhh—”

“You’re seasick, sir!” a sailor onboard shouted. “Go back in and lie down! Eat something bland—but take care not to overeat!”

Li Jinglong had gone deathly pale. He’d been so thorough in his calculations, yet failed to foresee that he’d be seasick. Unfortunately, Hongjun found this awfully funny. It was his first time aboard any kind of ship, and he’d never even considered such a possibility. Recalling what he’d read about seasickness in his medical texts, he ran up and down the ship for some plain congee for Li Jinglong.

In a complete departure from the confident, virile man he’d been in bed just yesterday, Li Jinglong had completely wilted. He could do nothing but sit and eat his congee.

Hongjun placed acupuncture needles along the acupoints behind Li Jinglong’s ears and boiled some medicinal herbs the boatmen had on hand

into a decoction, which he instructed Li Jinglong to drink before tucking him into bed. Li Jinglong merely lay there, listless and fatally embarrassed.

"I wanted to be with you properly these few days…" Stomach half empty, Li Jinglong felt nauseous and feeble. "I can't believe I got seasick."

Hongjun laughed. "It's okay. I like this too. I like everything, as long as I'm with you."

Although it was already the fourth month of the year, the evening winds were still strong on the Yellow River. Li Jinglong pulled Hongjun into his arms, chest to back, and the two of them wrapped themselves in the blankets. When they looked up, they could see the stars shining down outside the windows.

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Chapter 99:
The Divine Capital, Luoyang

TWO DAYS LATER, the ship docked at Sanmen Gorge.

With dry land under his feet again, Li Jinglong felt slightly better. Hongjun climbed to a spot high up over the gorge, from which he had a view of the surging waters of the Yellow River in the distance.

He thought of the carp yao's lifelong dream to jump over the Dragon Gate at Sanmen Gorge and turn into a dragon. Though he knew now that a carp couldn't become a dragon just by jumping over the Dragon Gate—it also had to accumulate merits—he couldn't resist taking a look at the place on Zhao Zilong's behalf. The carp yao had been with him since the day he first bade farewell to Chong Ming and Qing Xiong and left the Taihang Mountains. Thinking back on it, it seemed an eternity ago, especially now that he and Li Jinglong had at last bared their hearts to each other.

Hongjun hadn't heard a word from Chong Ming since the day they fled Yaojin Palace at the beginning of the year, and even when they'd been there, he'd treated Li Jinglong with hostility. Hongjun sighed as a wave of loneliness washed over him. It seemed he really had no family left.

After his bout of seasickness, Li Jinglong opted not to sail to the He-Luo region from Sanmen Gorge. Traveling merchants passed frequently through here, so they hired a carriage and followed the caravans down to Luoyang instead. Li Jinglong languished in the carriage for a day and a night, until his nausea abated and his desire for Hongjun reignited. Hongjun wasn't

so bold as to attempt such a thing in a moving carriage, and quickly pushed him away.

All of a sudden, Hongjun heard someone outside call, “In the divine capital of Luoyang, thousands of doors open in welcome—”

“We’re here!” Hongjun threw up the curtains and peered outside.

Li Jinglong covered his face with his palm, utterly resigned.

Thousands of years ago, King Wu of Zhou first made this place the capital of his dynasty and named it Luoyi. During the Qin dynasty, the city that was once the center of the nation was made a county and renamed Sanchuan Commandery for the three rivers flowing through it. Emperor Guangwu of Han had once again moved his capital to this city while he reigned, and in the aftermath of the Wei and Jin dynasties and the era of the Sixteen Kingdoms, Emperor Yang of Sui had done the same. With the rise of Great Tang, a new law had decreed that the nation have two capitals. Luoyang was thus crowned the eastern capital, and later became the emperors Li Zhi and Wu Zhao’s long-term residence.

During Wu Zhao’s reign, Luoyang had been dubbed the divine capital. The layout of the city was based on the twenty-eight constellations of the universe, with seven heavenly landmarks that corresponded to the seven stars of the Northern Dipper. Among these grand structures was the Ziwei Palace, named for the Ziwei enclosure—the northernmost of the three celestial enclosures—which sat surrounded by stars in the very center of the sky. Hence it was known as the Central Palace, and because it was where the emperor resided, it was also referred to as the Hall of Enlightenment.

Luoyang during the fourth month was just as Li Longji had described in his poem: The fragrant trees of Luoyang were mirrored in the Tianjin River as freshly grown willow leaves draped along the riverbank.[7] Tianjin Bridge spanned the Luo River, whose waters flowed toward the brilliant Milky Way glimmering over the horizon.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun passed through the gates of Luoyang, leading their horses. The eastern capital wasn't as sprawling as Chang'an, and its bustling population was less diverse, but it was grand in a way unique to the Central Plains.

Leaning over the bridge's railing, Hongjun looked down at the schools of fish swimming in the Luo River and pondered how Fuxi, the divine ancestor of humankind, had reached enlightenment about the eight trigrams on the banks of this very river before proceeding to create the ancient cosmological map known as the Yellow River Diagram and the Luoshu Square often used alongside it. The Divine Land seemed exceptionally vast at that moment, with so much to see and feel, and Hongjun found himself wondering if he could set foot on every inch of it and see all there was to see in one lifetime.

"Head east," said Li Jinglong. "Along Dingdingmen Street."

"Are we staying at an inn?"

Li Jinglong shook his head. He and Hongjun were both leading horses, and the clothes they wore made it obvious they were from Chang'an. A journey to the eastern capital from its western counterpart took only a few days, but the local customs began to diverge just beyond Hangu Pass. The influence of foreign tribes was more pronounced on the citizens of Chang'an, who wore robes with gathered sleeves and favored more casual accessories

and hairstyles. Comparatively, the folk of Luoyang were more particular about their appearance. On top of that, Li Jinglong was handsome and Hongjun was bright and spirited, and so the pair attracted many gazes as they wandered through the streets.

“We’re going to the Heavenly Hall,” Li Jinglong said. “I heard a long time ago that the original headquarters of the Department of Exorcism were located there.”

It was Wu Zhao who’d built the Heavenly Hall, a towering structure devoted to worshiping the Buddha, which later became the headquarters of the Department of Exorcism helmed by Di Renjie. When Emperor Zhongzong, Li Xian, moved the capital to Chang’an, the department had followed. The department’s plaque had been removed and the site deserted, though the premises were still clean and in good repair, thanks to the novice monks who took care of it.

The sun shone brightly on this beautiful late-spring day, and an unruly group of children were playing cuju and kicking jianzi on the large drill grounds at the foot of the tower.

Li Jinglong pushed the door open and smiled. “Isn’t it strange? The department headquarters in Chang’an were derelict when we arrived, but the Luoyang headquarters are so clean even though no one’s here.”

“But doesn’t it look like someone’s stayed here recently?” Hongjun asked, spotting a clay tea set on the table.

“Yongsi stayed overnight when he came to Luoyang to investigate that case of the brain-eating yao,” Li Jinglong explained as they unpacked their bags.

Only then did Hongjun recall Qiu Yongsi's adventure and realize he must have told Li Jinglong about his stay at the department's former headquarters.

Li Jinglong dug out a few copper coins—old currency from the previous dynasty—and called to one of the kids kicking jianzi outside. He handed the boy a bit of money and said, "Please deliver one of these coins to a man named Sheshe in Yunlai Ward, east of the main avenue, and the other to Lao-Wu in Siwen Alley, off Kuixing Street."

The boy scampered off, and Li Jinglong and Hongjun sat down in the erstwhile department headquarters to drink tea as they waited. Just like in their headquarters in Chang'an, murals of Acalanatha adorned the walls; as Hongjun ran his eyes over them, the image of his parents' murderer—a war god clad in golden armor—surfaced in his mind. It struck him then that the man in his memory must have been the reincarnation of Acalanatha's true form.

Hongjun stood before the murals, looking up at each image of Acalanatha and the six artifacts he wielded. The sword, which appeared more often than any other, was the same Sword of Wisdom that Li Jinglong always carried with him.

"Qing Xiong told me Mara can only be slain, and the demon seed purified, by one who wields all six artifacts. Is that true?"

"That's just a legend." Li Jinglong brewed tea as he listened. After some consideration, he continued, "I asked Yongsi about it once too, and we studied quite a few of the historical materials Duke Di left behind. The legends say that if Mara returns and gains the full extent of its power, it can

only be killed when the six artifacts of Acalanatha are merged into one. Only then will the malign energies within it return to the heavens."

"Malign energies are born from all living things in the mortal world; they can never be completely destroyed," Hongjun said. "It's only the demon seed that's killed."

"Mm." Li Jinglong saw what Hongjun meant. If the six artifacts of Acalanatha were ever gathered, it would be for one purpose only: to destroy the demon seed inside Hongjun's heart.

"Did you ever try searching for the other five artifacts over the years?" Hongjun asked, studying the artifacts in the murals.

"There's no point," Li Jinglong said. "They've been lost for almost a thousand years. It's been so long since Mara's previous reincarnation—where would I even begin to look?"

"When was the last time Mara reincarnated?"

"When the Qin dynasty lost the throne, all under the heavens sought it for themselves," Li Jinglong answered. "Countless people died as the Qin dynasty conquered new lands, and the butcher general Bai Qi buried four hundred thousand surrendering soldiers alive. When the second emperor of Qin passed, the continent once again fell into chaos and bloodshed, birthing malign energies so potent they were beyond what the heavenly and earthly meridians could absorb. Thus, Mara was born into the mortal world… Come over here."

Hongjun knew Li Jinglong had studied history carefully since he was made chief of the Department of Exorcism; he didn't doubt it was just as he said. "If Mara really does reincarnate…"

“It won’t. I promise you,” Li Jinglong said seriously. “It’s not time yet, Hongjun.”

Hongjun’s brows were tightly knit as Li Jinglong resumed his explanation. “The first time Mara was born was after the legendary Battle of Zhuolu, and the second was more than a thousand years later, during the Battle of Muye. The order of nature is eternal; it is not upheld by benevolent rulers, nor will it perish on account of violent kings. The third reincarnation of Mara came when the Chu and Han forces fought for dominion over these lands. Think about it. What do all these occurrences have in common?”

“They’re all wars that claimed many lives,” Hongjun answered.

Li Jinglong nodded. “When the resentment of the dead does not dissipate, it lingers in the mortal world. More and more of it gradually accumulates over time.”

“But so many things have happened over the past thousand years,” Hongjun said after a moment of thought. “Never mind the wars of the ancient past—weren’t there plenty of casualties during the war between the Han and the Hu four hundred years ago?”

Li Jinglong was surprised Hongjun knew this piece of the Divine Land’s history. After pondering the idea, he said, “So you think the demonic energies absorbed by Xie Yu and An Lushan are remnants from that time?”

Hongjun nodded, and Li Jinglong sighed. “It’s true—the malign energies in the mortal world increase with each successive thousand-year cycle. Duke Di wrote this in his records as well.”

The first cycle had occurred in near-mythic antiquity, when Mara was born amid the Battle of Zhuolu. The second cycle covered the period when the three ancient dynasties were founded; it began when King Wu of Zhou

led his troops against King Zhou of Shang's army of four hundred thousand men in the Battle of Muye before achieving immortality. There were many more deaths during this battle than there'd been during the Battle of Zhuolu—about which few historical records remained—but it still was by no means the bloodiest period of the Divine Land's history.

During the third cycle, seven states waged war against one another, causing millions upon millions of deaths. Bai Qi massacred four hundred thousand Zhao soldiers who'd already surrendered, prompting the allied forces of the other six nations—an army of five hundred thousand—to storm Hangu Pass. The bloodbath reached its peak when the Qin state ultimately conquered the others and unified the nation. Finally the lands settled into peace after the Qin emperor established new regulations governing transportation and a standardized writing system. Many had hoped this calmer era would mean an end to the millennia-spanning catastrophe—but the tyranny imposed by the Qin dynasty's founding emperor caused malign energies to spike once more, summoning the third reincarnation of Mara.

Li Jinglong hadn't managed to find any description of Mara's previous descents into the mortal world—though not for lack of trying. There were simply not enough sources from those days. But he was certain of one thing: After Mara's reincarnation, Acalanatha would appear to eliminate the heavenly demon, and the malign energies would return to the heavenly and earthly meridians. Di Renjie wouldn't have founded the Department of Exorcism otherwise.

"Know thine enemy, and thou shalt go undefeated," Hongjun recited. "Sometimes I catch myself thinking that even I don't know—what exactly am I?"

This was a topic Li Jinglong rarely discussed with him; he didn't want Hongjun to worry over these things. Yet the closer they'd become, the more he'd begun to understand: This young man with his pretty face often appeared oblivious, but he actually had a lot on his mind. He was deeply cognizant of his origins and the demon seed within him. But because Li Jinglong didn't usually bring it up, he didn't mention it either.

Evading Hongjun's question was futile, so Li Jinglong opted to be direct: "To be honest, I've wondered the same thing. But this question has nothing to do with who you are. You're you—you're Hongjun, my wife."

Hongjun laughed. Before he could comment on this statement, Li Jinglong went on, "But as for what Mara is—I often discuss that with the other guys. You're right: 'Know thine enemy, and thou shalt go undefeated.' This is what our ancestors taught us. So, to defeat this enemy, we must first understand it."

Hongjun hummed in agreement. "The demon seed—the original manifestation of it—was in my father's body. Was it my father who transformed into Mara all those times before? If he did, how did Acalanatha k…kill him?"

"First, there's the matter of the six artifacts of Acalanatha—the Sword of Wisdom, the Demon-Quelling Staff, the Yao-Binding Cord, the Golden Sun Wheel, the Umbral Bow, and the Thunderbolt Arrows. We don't know where the other five artifacts are, but if your father turned into Mara, the demon inside him could only have been eliminated by someone wielding all six artifacts."

"What if it was me?" Hongjun abruptly asked. "What if I—"

“No!” Li Jinglong shot him down immediately. “Why would you say something like that?”

The moment Hongjun opened his mouth, Li Jinglong knew what he was trying to say: He would absorb all the demonic energy Xie Yu had acquired via his three divided souls, turning himself into a demon Li Jinglong could eliminate.

“Fine.” Hongjun scratched his head. “I guess it might just make things worse. You don’t have all the artifacts, and we’ll be in more trouble if I end up losing myself again.”

“That’s not the problem,” Li Jinglong bit out, angry now. “What will I do if you die? What I care about most is *you*, not anything else!”

This, Hongjun didn’t expect. He said weakly, “Okay.”

It seemed Lu Xu had kept his secrets well—this was Li Jinglong’s first time hearing about this notion of Hongjun’s. Li Jinglong seemed torn between anger and shock as he repeatedly confirmed that Hongjun had truly cast the idea aside.

“Okay,” Hongjun repeated. “Okay, I promise.”

“It’s not okay!” Li Jinglong snapped. “You didn’t take a single word I said to heart.”

As Hongjun studied Li Jinglong, he felt his stomach twist. He wasn’t that attached to living, to be honest—likely because he’d grown up under the care of Chong Ming, who was largely indifferent toward matters of life and death. Qing Xiong wasn’t fixated on such things either. As the saying went, “the mushroom of the morning knows not what transpires between the beginning and end of the month, and the summer cicada knows nothing of

spring or autumn."[8] The lives of both human and yao were infinitesimally insignificant compared to the vastness of heaven and earth, no more than a drop of water in the boundless sea. And so Hongjun, too, had been nonchalant about life and death since childhood. Of course he was happy to be alive, but he wouldn't feel much regret even if he were to die the next day. This was especially true after coming to love Li Jinglong—it made him feel like his life had not gone to waste.

But he had one worry, which was that Li Jinglong would live out his remaining years in sorrow if he died.

This was something he didn't dare bring up; Li Jinglong would surely admonish him to no end. Seeing Li Jinglong so furious at the mere suggestion, he could only nod again and again.

"Swear to me," Li Jinglong said at last. "Swear you'll live a long, happy life with Gege."

Warmth welling in his chest, Hongjun nodded. "I swear. We'll live together."

"Swear on my life. If you ever do such a stupid, reckless thing, I'll die."

"I can't do that," Hongjun said at once.

"If you really plan to sacrifice yourself, I won't kill you. I won't resist at all when you kill me, which will make you feel worse. After I die, no one will be able to stop you; you'll become the demon king. You can raze the Divine Land to the ground for all I care."

"How could you do that?!"

"Why not? I have to protect my own heart, don't I?"

Hongjun was at a loss for how to refute this statement, and he was unable to persuade Li Jinglong, whose sharp mind had already hit on his greatest weakness. Hongjun had suggested sacrificing himself to destroy their enemy because he wanted to save everyone—including Li Jinglong—but Li Jinglong's declaration gave him no choice but to abandon the idea.

Their conversation was interrupted by a call from outside: "We request an audience with the king!"

They turned to see two men striding in, both scrawny in their own bizarre way. The man on the left had a lean, reptilian face that tapered to a sharp point—the same sand snake yao A-Tai had captured back at Yumen Pass. The man on the right appeared around forty, with a hunched back and an unkempt beard obscuring the bottom of his monkey-like face. He sketched a bow. "Greetings, Your Majesty."

As Li Jinglong motioned for them to enter, Hongjun thought, *Since when did you become a king?*

Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun to explain. "Lao-Wu is a monkey yao. He was a slave of the macaque that was causing trouble here. After Yongsi killed the murderer, Lao-Wu was set free. He's now making a living selling fruit in Luoyang."

The two yaoguai prostrated themselves before Hongjun—only then did he realize the person they were addressing as *Your Majesty* was himself. "Please rise," he said hastily. "I'm not a king!"

Li Jinglong gave him an inscrutable look. Confused, Hongjun nodded. "Young Master Qiu gave both of you some tasks," Li Jinglong said, turning back to their guests. "How are they coming along?"

“His Majesty Qing Xiong told us to keep close watch, too, sir,” the sand snake said. “A couple of days ago, two powerful yaoguai—subordinates of the heavenly demon—arrived in Luoyang.”

“Qing Xiong?” Hongjun echoed in surprise. “When was he here?”

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Chapter 100:
Anxieties

"HALF A MONTH AGO," the monkey yao named Lao-Wu replied. "The king is presently gathering members of the yao race in preparation for war against the heavenly demon."

Hongjun was stunned into silence; so many things had happened while he'd been left in the dark.

The full story now came to light: Li Jinglong had sent Qiu Yongsi here before the break-ins at the imperial mausoleums to investigate claims of a yaoguai who ate children's brains. Having cultivated for over three centuries, the macaque Qiu Yongsi found proved an extremely difficult opponent. In the midst of their battle, Qing Xiong had arrived out of nowhere, defeating the macaque and forcing it back into its original form.

Qing Xiong and Qiu Yongsi had conducted a joint interrogation of the macaque and managed to obtain some useful information. When they were done, Qing Xiong informed Qiu Yongsi he was assembling yao that belonged to neither Xie Yu nor the heavenly demon's faction to assist Li Jinglong in his coming battle against Xie Yu. He'd then quickly made his farewells and departed Luoyang.

When the macaque first came to Luoyang, it had enslaved a young monkey—Lao-Wu, who was in front of them now. As for the sand snake yao, Li Jinglong, Hongjun learned, had freed him on purpose. After departing Dunhuang, Li Jinglong had left Hongjun alone in the bathhouse while he traveled to meet the captive to take care of this matter himself. He released

the sand snake yao, instructing him to return to Chang'an and give Xie Yu some important information.

"What information?" Hongjun asked, lost.

"He told Xie Yu the demon seed inside you was volatile, and that you could lose control over it at any time," Li Jinglong said. "I was hoping to force Xie Yu to accelerate his plans. That way, he'd come for you immediately to reclaim the demonic energy he had so carefully absorbed as the heart demon inside Lu Xu—the demonic energy you stole."

"But you…" Hongjun trailed off as Li Jinglong shot him a look. He understood at once—Li Jinglong had already planned to seal the demon seed with the heart lamp when he deliberately let slip to Xie Yu that it couldn't be controlled. Xie Yu had taken the bait and tried to steal the demonic energy from Hongjun in the Zhao Mausoleum. In this regard, Li Jinglong's plan had been a success: Hongjun had fought him off, and Xie Yu had inadvertently revealed his whereabouts, enabling Li Jinglong to narrow down their suspects to Yang Guozhong.

Hongjun thought back again over everything that had happened. What made Li Jinglong so sure he could seal the demonic energy inside him? Perhaps, he realized, it was that night in Dunhuang, when the ghost king had told them about the seven emotions and six desires. Li Jinglong couldn't seal Lu Xu—but he could seal Hongjun.

Looking back, it seemed Li Jinglong's tactics and plans were all interconnected. The corner of Hongjun's mouth twitched. "You're way too devious."

"I just made a few small deductions," Li Jinglong said humbly. "Hardly worth mentioning." He turned to the two yao. "Tell us, has there

been any unusual activity?”

“A great number of yao arrived in Luoyang,” the sand snake yao answered deferentially, “including Masters… Uh, two gu apes. They’re in the city now.”

Lao-Wu grimaced; he obviously feared the apes. “They’re formidable opponents, Your Majesty. You must be careful.”

According to the conversation Zhao Zilong had overheard, the two apes had left Chang’an to pursue the divine kun, who had escaped after suffering grievous injuries. It seemed the two yaoguai had remained in Luoyang instead of returning directly to An Lushan in Chang’an—though what they were planning here was anyone’s guess.

Li Jinglong mulled this over. “Where are they now?”

“One of them is at Ten Thousand Blooms, a restaurant east of Tianjin Bridge,” the sand snake yao answered. “The other is at House of Peerless Beauty, outside the city.”

As Li Jinglong sank into thought, Hongjun noticed Lao-Wu open and then close his mouth, as if considering whether to say more. He motioned for the monkey yao to speak.

“Has another yao king come to Luoyang?” the monkey yao asked. “A few days ago, I felt a great surge of yao energy, but it was gone before I could locate its source.”

Li Jinglong put the pieces together in an instant—the divine kun had either been captured or was hiding somewhere in Luoyang to nurse his injuries. He told the two yao to continue monitoring the city and left them

with instructions to report to him immediately if anything else happened before dismissing them.

He and Hongjun remained in the main hall, Hongjun still replaying Li Jinglong's labyrinthine maneuvers in his mind as Li Jinglong stood lost in thought. He glanced at Hongjun every now and then, a smile stealing over his face.

"What are you smiling at?" Hongjun asked.

"I'm smiling because you're finally mine," Li Jinglong said. "Can't I be happy about it?"

Hongjun gave him an exasperated look. "Well, what do we do now?"

"You've charmed me so thoroughly, I can't think straight," Li Jinglong said helplessly. "I've turned into an idiot."

Hongjun grinned back at him. "I'm going out for a walk. Is that okay?" Li Jinglong nodded eagerly and made to get up. "Alone," Hongjun said. "You can stay here and think."

Li Jinglong was less than pleased, but even he realized they couldn't just cling to each other and canoodle all day. Being with Hongjun robbed him of his ability to think critically—when he was here, he only wanted to talk to Hongjun. He said reluctantly, "Watch the time; don't stay out too late."

Hongjun leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips. "I'll get us some food while I'm out."

That kiss made steam rise from Li Jinglong's head like he was a kettle singing on the stove.

Once he'd calmed down, it struck him how comfortable Hongjun was around him now compared to before, when he'd reciprocated Li Jinglong's

affection much more reluctantly. Perhaps it was thanks to that dream, filled with childhood memories of them, that he'd let down his guard. Li Jinglong had the strange feeling they'd been at each other's side for years, two halves of a loving whole—this was the sort of love he'd been yearning for all his life.

All in all, everything seemed too good to be true—and that made Li Jinglong nervous. He was firstly not yao, and secondly not from a sufficiently respectable family; he wasn't worthy of Hongjun's affection. He feared these happy days were ephemeral, like a dream—just as flowers at the peak of their bloom would surely wilt, and the sun would surely set. He worried over the faint sense of foreboding underlying so much of what Hongjun said. And then there was that dream he'd had, in which…

Li Jinglong stewed in his anxieties throughout the afternoon. He didn't know where Hongjun had gone, and fretted that he'd be abducted by the apes. But the heavenly demon wasn't in Luoyang, and he really should stop working himself up over nothing. He had cases to solve, details to smooth out, an interconnected series of traps to lay for the apes to step into…

Why wasn't Hongjun back yet? How long had he been gone? The incense on the tea table was still burning. So little time had passed—so why did it feel like forever?

It was Hongjun's first time in Luoyang, and he'd left Li Jinglong behind for one simple reason: He wanted to buy Li Jinglong a gift. He'd always envied those romances he'd read in books, of people who found their best beloved and stayed with them until their hair turned white. Granted, love didn't always end well—the poet Zhuo Wenjun, for example, began her "Ode

to White Hair" with the lines, *I heard you have another on your mind, so I come to bid you farewell.* But if husband and wife shared a love so resilient they never doubted each other's hearts, there could be nothing better in the world.

Thus Hongjun wanted to give Li Jinglong a love token. Jade and gold were too common, and sword tassels and armor too uncouth; a protective spiritual device, he thought, would make a decent gift. Back at Yaojin Palace, he'd tried his hand at making some trinkets to use on Chong Ming, but most of them ended up failures. He'd never attempted a spiritual device before—he'd have to ask Qiu Yongsi about it after he returned.

There was only one marketplace in Luoyang, which was smaller than both the East and West Markets in Chang'an. As Hongjun strolled around the stalls, his eyes lit on a thumb ring. Li Jinglong was an accomplished archer; a thumb ring was a good idea. He bought one he liked, planning to use it as the mold for a spiritual device he'd make with materials he'd gather later.

He resumed his shopping and came across a set of leather armor crafted in the Hu style. This type of outfit, consisting of several leather bands that wrapped around the left arm and a leather glove for the right, was normally worn by falconers. Hongjun recalled the defined muscles of Li Jinglong's chest and abdomen and concluded this revealing style of armor was sure to look good on him. He frittered away his money and bought the full set.

The spring breeze caressed his face. Hongjun was about to step into the apothecary for some herbs when he saw a man convulsing on the ground outside, moaning in pain. His body was covered in sores, a gruesome sight entirely at odds with the beautiful spring day.

“Help me… Help…” he moaned.

“You’re doomed, so stop screaming,” an apothecary attendant snapped as he came out. He called, “Hey! Is his family here? Hurry up and take him home!”

Feeling a pang of sympathy, Hongjun bent to take the man’s pulse. “Don’t touch him!” the doctor inside warned. “You’ll catch it too!”

The sun was already sinking in the west, and the market stalls were closing up for the day. Hongjun addressed the man. “Where do you live?”

“I have money—I’ll give you money, just save me.” Despite his plight, the man’s voice was full of determination, unwilling to bow to his fate. He raised his head and looked at the apothecary. “I don’t want to die, Doctor. Save me, and I’ll repay you with my life!”

As the sun set over Chang’an, Mergen, clad in rough-spun clothes, pushed a handcart through an alley. He and Lu Xu were on the way to the Anxi Barracks to deliver jars of wine.

“Today?” Lu Xu asked.

Mergen hesitated. “Let’s wait one more day.”

They’d gotten this job on the recommendation of Turandokht, in her capacity as the owner of Lanling Amber. Every day before the sun set, they delivered forty jars of wine to the Anxi Barracks for the officers under An Lushan’s command.

Since arriving in Chang’an, An Lushan had traveled back and forth from the palace, carried aloft on his sedan chair by a team of sixteen men. He’d go off to pay his respects to the emperor and noble consort, then return

to feast with his officers. By Mergen's count, there were two hundred men in the Anxi Barracks, polishing off ten lambs and ten pigs every day, as well as chicken, duck, and geese in addition to heaping piles of venison, water deer, and fish. Jars upon jars of wine were poured into a massive vat and delivered into the banquet hall, where the men would scoop the wine out with their bowls.

"I think we should do it today," Lu Xu said. "The servants here are beginning to recognize us."

As Mergen pushed the handcart in, he was greeted by the housekeeper in charge of purchasing. "Hey, you're here early today!"

"Ah—yes." Mergen wiped his hands with a rag, looking the part of a servant exactly. If not for his tall and lean stature, he would be indistinguishable from the others here. Lu Xu, on the other hand, was fair-skinned and pretty, obviously unused to heavy manual labor. He stood to the side, watching the exchange with impassive eyes. The first time they'd come, Mergen had introduced Lu Xu as his scholarly distant cousin, claiming he was working to pay for the books he needed to prepare for the imperial examinations next year.

The housekeeper suspected nothing. "Just pour the wine into the vat, as usual."

Lu Xu watched idly as Mergen poured the wine. At that moment, the steward bustled into the rear courtyard and accosted the housekeeper. "Where did the two boys holding the meat platters yesterday disappear to? Head to the West Market later and fetch another pair. Good-looking ones."

Lu Xu cast a glance at Mergen, who nodded back without a word while he went on with his work with a smile. The previous night, Ashina Adarvan

had put two servant boys out of commission with an unfortunate bout of diarrhea and vomiting so Mergen and Lu Xu could take their place. This was their chance.

The housekeeper looked at Mergen. “No need to go to the market—you two will do. You’re tall, so remember to kneel properly. Don’t straighten your back and you’ll be fine.”

Mergen quickly agreed, grinning broadly. Lu Xu, on the other hand, feigned reluctance.

“You’ll be paid!” the housekeeper urged. “Two hundred copper coins. If the governor is in a good mood, who knows? He might reward you with a tael of silver, and you’ll be rich!”

Only then did Lu Xu nod as well. The housekeeper, relieved to avoid having to run off to the West Market for two measly servants, immediately called for someone to take them away. They were to be bathed and provided a change of clothes so they would be ready to serve An Lushan at the evening banquet.

By nightfall, Mergen and Lu Xu were washing haphazardly in the rear courtyard. Year-round exposure to the sun had tanned Mergen’s skin to a warm bronze, while Lu Xu, used to wearing a long-sleeved uniform and traveling by night as a scout, truly did have the milky complexion of a scholar.

Mergen glanced at Lu Xu and asked with a laugh, “Who’s fairer, you or Hongjun?”

“None of your business,” Lu Xu retorted, turning away from him. Mergen’s mind went blank as he stared at Lu Xu’s bare back and shoulders;

he suddenly understood Li Jinglong's preference for young men as a wave of primitive, vulgar desire washed over him.

Once clean, they changed into leather skirts, leaving their torsos naked save for a pair of leather belts. This was a common form of dress among the Göktürks of the west. An Lushan often went about decked in gold and silver, but as a man of Göktürk descent, he preferred his soldiers to wear this style of Turkic leather armor that bared the chest in a display of their bravery and prowess.

Mergen and Lu Xu found their way to the banquet preparations, where they were greeted by the sight of a servant dumping baskets of live fish into wooden cases. Among the fish flopping on the ground was a familiar carp, who quickly tucked in his hands and feet and slipped into a case while the servant wasn't looking, leaving only his head peeking out.

As the servant carried one of the cases away, Lu Xu called quietly, "Zhao Zilong!"

The carp yao popped out of the pile of fish. Mergen beckoned him over. "I'm not wearing any clothes!" he protested. "It's too embarrassing!"

"You didn't wear clothes before, did you?" Mergen asked.

"It feels different not wearing any now that I'm used to them!" The carp yao ducked back into the case just as the servant came back for it.

Bored stiff, Mergen and Lu Xu sat down in the corridor within the rear courtyard to wait. Mergen glanced sidelong at Lu Xu, studying him as he searched for something to say. Lu Xu, apathetic as always, remained silent.

"Hey," Mergen said.

“Mm.” Lu Xu glanced at him. His glimpse of Mergen’s memories had given him a strange feeling, like he was meeting him again for the first time.

“Don’t worry,” Mergen assured him. “We’ll be fine.”

“Who’s worried about you?” Lu Xu said. “You wish.”

“Why don’t you be my didi?” Mergen reached out to pat Lu Xu’s head.

Lu Xu swatted him away. “I’m not Hongjun,” he said. “He doesn’t understand anything, but I do. You can’t trick me into following you around with just a few meals.”

“Oh?” Mergen laughed. “If I really wanted to trick you, things would be much different. I’ve never kept anything from you.”

“You didn’t tell them about your past?” Lu Xu asked.

Mergen hadn’t expected Lu Xu to bring up the contents of his dream. He said nonchalantly, “What’s there to tell?”

“Not even Li Jinglong?” Lu Xu pressed.

But Mergen was obviously unwilling to discuss it. “Later, we’ll do just as we planned—”

“You didn’t come to Chang’an just to see the world,” Lu Xu said. “Am I right?”

“I came in search of you, didn’t I?” Something flickered in Mergen’s eyes. He seemed like a completely different person now; even his smile was more complicated, filled with a mix of emotions.

“Why are you staying in the Department of Exorcism, then?”

“For my brothers, of course.”

“A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan want to recover the sacred flame and rebuild their nation, and Yongsi-ge is staying to capture Xie Yu—”

“Why do you all like Yongsi so much?” Mergen asked, studying Lu Xu. “You all call him *ge*.”

“He’s very talented,” Lu Xu said.

“Sure, while I’m a dumb brute,” Mergen replied with a chuckle.

Before Lu Xu could question him further, they heard a horrified scream from the kitchen. Recognizing the carp yao’s voice, they dashed toward the sound as Zhao Zilong came barreling out.

“It’s too scary!” The carp yao was shivering in fear. “I can’t go back in there!”

“What’s going on?” Lu Xu and Mergen both tensed. Mergen strode briskly down the corridor toward the kitchen with Lu Xu just a step behind. He pushed open the door expecting to find the heavenly demon, only to see over a hundred dried and salted fish hanging beneath the eaves.

“Time to face your fears,” Lu Xu said expressionlessly.

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Chapter 102:
A Bloody Bet

THE GONG CLANGED to mark nightfall, and music swelled within the Anxi Barracks. Soldiers sounded chimes and bells, adding to the bustling atmosphere of the hall with their raucous, lively music.

An Lushan, seated on a low dais, gorged himself on meat and wine, spilling his cup all over his couch. A young eunuch quickly stepped forward to wipe him clean. His generals—uncultured brutes who had served under his command for years—roared to be heard over the music. In the middle of the hall, two warriors danced, spears twirling.

Mergen and Lu Xu were positioned on one knee on either side of An Lushan, each holding a large golden platter. Whenever more food was served, An Lushan's attendant would deposit servings of grilled meat, roasted chicken, or fruit and vegetables onto the platters. An Lushan would point at what he wanted, and a young eunuch would bring it over, either feeding An Lushan or letting the governor take what he wanted himself.

The pair made the most of this opportunity to observe An Lushan. The governor was as colossal as a mountain, adorned with so many accessories they were practically dripping off him. The golden chain that had been around his neck the day he arrived in Chang'an was gone, replaced with a pendant with a peacock-green jewel. Massive, luminescent night pearls dangled from his ears, and a belt of white jade encircled his considerable girth.

More than three dozen officers were in attendance at the banquet tonight, as well as other military officials invited by An Lushan, including the captain of the Longwu Guard, Hu Sheng. Surrounded by animated chatter, An Lushan watched as the warriors in the center of the hall began to spar, laughing heartily as one sent the other crashing to the floor.

Mergen shot Lu Xu a look, reminding him to observe the hall. The warriors' battle was getting increasingly heated; the music had stopped, replaced by an endless roll of the drums. The combatants moved faster and faster, until finally, one faltered from exhaustion.

"Kill him!" An Lushan roared.

The victor charged his weaker opponent. He drove his spear straight into his enemy's abdomen, the tip piercing cleanly through taut muscle and out the man's back. The loser fell to the ground, blood spilling from his mouth.

Such matches were a nightly occurrence in the Anxi Barracks, but it was Hu Sheng's first time here. He paled and bit down on a cry.

The generals bellowed madly. The victor left his spear in his opponent's stomach as he turned to face An Lushan, sinking to one knee and clasping his hands as he bowed.

An Lushan was about to rise to bestow a reward upon him when his expression changed. The loser of the battle—the spear still lodged in his body—suddenly drew the sword strapped to his leg and threw it with all his strength at the winner, whose back was toward him.

Everyone shouted. Lu Xu almost dropped the platter in his hands as the victor's head rolled down the steps of the dais.

“Excellent!” An Lushan thundered. “Reward him, reward him!”

But the loser wouldn’t survive this, either, despite having avenged himself—not with that gaping hole in his gut and his innards spilling out. Blood splashed onto the floor from the winner’s neck, and a few servants hurried to haul the corpses away and lay down carpets to soak up the blood.

In the reeking hall, An Lushan ordered, “Unleash the beast!”

The generals cheered.

The golden platters Mergen and Lu Xu had been holding were taken away, replaced by two white jade plates piled with glistening raw mutton. Only then did Lu Xu understand what the housekeeper meant when he said they’d be holding the meat platters.

Soon after, a cage holding a black panther was dragged in from outside the hall. As the guests exclaimed over it, Hu Sheng asked, “What’s the cat for?”

An Lushan bellowed a laugh. “Just wait and see, Hu Sheng.”

Lu Xu eyed the panther, then shot a glance at Mergen. After a moment of hesitation, Mergen narrowed his eyes and shook his head minutely.

Nostrils flaring at the stench of blood, the panther turned to glare at An Lushan with a low growl. Several beast tamers followed it in and nudged the animal toward the center of the hall with spiked poles. The servants surrounded it with nets of iron links, which they connected with chains. They hoisted the nets up to the ceiling and fastened them to cage the animal in, leaving an opening barely wide enough for a person to enter.

The crisp jingling of bells heralded the entrance of four young men at the front of the hall. They were clad only in white silk pants, their fair torsos

bare. Khitan script scrawled on their backs in red cinnabar marked their low status, and bells were tied to their ankles. Upon sighting the panther, all four went deathly pale.

Lu Xu gave Mergen another sharp look. Mergen shook his head slightly again.

“Who will you bet on?” An Lushan called. “Come, come! Time to place your wagers!”

The steward stepped out bearing four platters, each corresponding to one of the young men. Lu Xu’s scalp went numb as he watched the proceedings.

Even when Mergen was still with his tribe, he’d heard tales about An Lushan’s proclivity for pretty young men—yet he’d never expected him to be so blatant in his disregard for their lives, even here in Chang’an.

The court officials in the hall placed their bets, looking fearful. An Lushan announced, “I’ll bet on the third one!”

The boy rushed forward to kneel before An Lushan, sobbing, but all four were sent inside the cage soon after. The instant the spiked sticks were retracted, the panther pounced.

The boys scattered desperately, howling in fear. One collapsed to the floor as his legs gave out. Lu Xu tensed. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, screams of terror rang out in the hall, one after another.

The panther’s black fur made a deadly contrast with the doomed boy’s fair-skinned body. The bright crimson of blood spurting as the panther sank its teeth into him was horrifying to behold; nauseated, a few of the court military officials in attendance leaned over in their seats and retched.

An Lushan and his underlings were roaring with excitement. After mauling a second boy to death, the panther ignored the other two, eager to feast on its kill. The beast tamers struck it with their spiked sticks, and the animal snarled in rage.

The governor surged to his feet, and the entire hall looked to him in surprise. An Lushan walked down the steps of the dais, grabbed a fistful of mutton from the plate Lu Xu was holding, and tossed the meat into the cage. As the panther pounced on the mutton and devoured it, the beast tamers and servants hurried to drag the corpses out of the enclosure.

Mergen looked up at An Lushan's back. His pants hung loosely on his corpulent body, revealing a glittering sliver of scarlet—there seemed to be a red jewel embedded right in the small of his back, near his buttocks.

This time Mergen was the one to give Lu Xu a look, but Lu Xu was staring at the cage, his eyes alight with fury.

Only two of the four boys remained. They tried to seize the opportunity to run for their lives as the corpses were dragged out, but the cage was sealed shut again, and another round of slaughter commenced.

The screams of terror faded as the panther mauled the third boy to death, and silence descended upon the hall. An Lushan's face darkened—he had lost his bet.

Yet he didn't order the cage opened even as the last boy begged, "My lord, spare me, spare me!"

Before An Lushan could respond, the panther pounced on the last boy. Lu Xu squeezed his eyes shut, the young man's final bloodcurdling scream ringing in his ears alongside An Lushan's unrestrained guffaw.

“Split the winnings!” he ordered.

The steward personally delivered the money to everyone’s tables. Mergen motioned again for Lu Xu to look at An Lushan’s back, but An Lushan had already turned, pulling up his pants and tightening his belt. As he ascended the stairs, he glanced at Lu Xu.

“You,” An Lushan demanded. “Where are you from?”

In the deathly silence of the hall, Lu Xu looked up and answered steadily, “Liang Prefecture.”

“Get in there,” An Lushan ordered.

Mergen’s eyes went wide.

Lu Xu had sensed that An Lushan had taken notice of him the moment his revulsion showed on his face. He set down the plate he was holding. Mergen stared in shock as Lu Xu removed the belts he wore around his torso. He gripped them in his hands as he stepped barefoot into the cage, wearing only the leather battle skirt.

An Lushan looked Lu Xu up and down, his face twisted in an evil sneer. “If you’re still alive when the drums stop, come to my rooms tonight.”

The generals laughed uproariously. Though Hu Sheng and the other military officials had never seen Lu Xu, they noted that his bare torso was not as thin as the other boys’ had been.

As Lu Xu stepped cautiously toward the cage, Mergen ducked his head, reciting an incantation under his breath. One of his seven nailhead arrows floated carefully into the hall from outside the window and hovered in the air, its sharp tip aimed at the panther.

Lu Xu turned back and cast Mergen a glance. Mergen nodded almost imperceptibly, and Lu Xu bent and entered the cage.

The panther was pacing furiously, deprived of its kills. When it caught sight of the new arrival, it retreated a few slow steps, observing Lu Xu.

Lu Xu showed no fear. He stood across from the panther and met its yellow eyes.

Facing that gaze, the panther seemed unexpectedly wary.

“My trusted generals!” An Lushan called out. “Who will you bet on—the boy or the beast?!”

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A clamor rose at this surprising turn of events. An Lushan sneered. “I bet on my dark god, the panther here—begin!”

Matching the rhythmic beat of the massive drums, the panther and Lu Xu crouched in unison. Sweat trickled down Mergen’s forehead and dripped onto the floor.

The panther launched itself at Lu Xu, swift as an arrow leaving the bowstring. Lu Xu leapt barefoot onto the iron chains and flipped in midair, narrowly evading the panther’s claws.

Everyone cheered as human and panther changed places in the blink of an eye. Mergen relaxed slightly now that he knew the beast wasn’t as fast as Lu Xu, but still dared not lower his guard.

The panther snarled and clawed at Lu Xu, who remained unfazed as he ducked toward the animal’s belly. He grabbed the panther’s front paw and whirled to toss the beast’s entire weight over his shoulder.

The hall went still. Even the drummers forgot to beat their drums. In the deafening silence, the panther’s body twisted in midair as it hurtled toward the nets.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The drumbeat resumed at last. Lu Xu threw his arms wide and leapt up, darting across the iron nets toward the ceiling of the hall. Mergen craned his neck as the panther dashed toward Lu Xu, who had hooked one of his leather belts to the ceiling and used it to swing through the air.

The drumbeats reached a crescendo. The panther arced into the air, clawing at the iron nets. Lu Xu flipped and swung between the panther’s outstretched paws, landing a twisting kick on the panther’s flank. “Die!”

As the panther yowled in rage, Lu Xu wrapped another of his belts around its neck and pulled, hooking the other end to the top of the nets. He released the belt and let himself fall, grabbing the panther from behind and dragging the animal down with him.

The belt pulled taut around the panther's neck, and the beast's growl was cut off in its throat. Its claws flailed silently in the air as it swung from the ceiling.

Lu Xu landed gracefully on the floor. Scanning the crowd, he met An Lushan's gaze and said coldly, "You lose."

The hall was deathly still. With a final wheezing snarl, the panther was strangled to death, the light gradually fading from its eyes. Lu Xu recited a silent prayer and pressed his palm to the panther's flank. *If I hadn't killed you, more people would have died tomorrow because of An Lushan's bloodlust. Be free.*

Later that night, the housekeeper in charge of the barracks' purchases ushered Mergen and Lu Xu into An Lushan's rooms, where An Lushan's steward was attending to him.

Frightened out of his wits, the housekeeper explained, "My lord, they're a pair of cousins. The servants who usually hold the platters were ill today, so—"

A sharp rap sounded at the door. An Lushan called, "Not now!"

After listening to the rest of the housekeeper's hasty account, An Lushan turned to Lu Xu. "Is this true?"

Lu Xu nodded. Mergen interjected, “My cousin was born with this gift; he’s always run faster than the wind—”

An Lushan waved impatiently, his message clear: *I didn’t ask you.* He addressed the steward and the housekeeper: “You’re dismissed.”

When the room had emptied, he beckoned Lu Xu. “Come here.”

Lu Xu shuffled forward. Mergen bowed his head, his lips moving faintly. The six nailhead arrows flew through the air to silently surround An Lushan’s bedroom, hovering in the night sky outside.

As soon as Lu Xu was close enough, An Lushan wrapped his broad palms around his waist and pulled him into his lap. Lu Xu thrashed, calling to Mergen, “Ge!”

An Lushan wasn’t deterred in the slightest, licking at Lu Xu’s neck and face as he crooned, “You’re from Liang Prefecture? Are your parents alive? Have your cousin go home and tell them—”

“No! My lord, let me go!” Lu Xu cried.

He pushed An Lushan away, but An Lushan’s grip was like iron. Finally reaching his limit, Lu Xu roared, “Let me go!”

This at last angered An Lushan. “Impertinence!”

Mergen rushed forward and yanked Lu Xu down to his knees. Furious, An Lushan rose from his seat and stalked toward them, leaving his back unprotected as his colossal body loomed over them like a mountain.

“Spare us, please, my lord,” Mergen begged. “My cousin doesn’t understand—”

An Lushan drew a deep breath, ready to explode in rage. Light flashed in Mergen’s eyes. He yanked Lu Xu backward, and the pair leapt into the air,

putting distance between them and An Lushan. At his whistle, the six nailhead arrows shot through walls, windows, and doors, winging toward An Lushan’s unprotected back.

The moment An Lushan turned to face the onslaught of arrows, Mergen made a swift grab for the governor’s waist. His fingers were inches away when a burst of black flames sent him and Lu Xu flying. The nailhead arrows swiveled in the air and swooped toward An Lushan like shooting stars as a wall of blazing red flames roared up, covering An Lushan’s back. Throwing out those massive hands, An Lushan caught each of the arrows as they careened toward him.

An Lushan’s eyes seethed with black mist as the flames on his back flared brighter. Realizing they’d lost control of the situation, Lu Xu snatched a sword from the wall and stabbed toward An Lushan.

“Exorcists!” An Lushan’s voice deepened, modulating into something more terrifying than a dragon’s snarl. It sounded just like the heart demon they’d encountered in Dunhuang.

As dark fumes filled the room, Mergen shouted, “Lu Xu, run!”

They dashed out the door and into the darkened courtyard. Yet they’d only made it a few steps when the shadows funneled up into a whirlwind that swooped down on them as they fled. The exorcists sprang into the air, Mergen shifting into the gray wolf mid-leap as the whirlwind dissolved into a swarm of venomous insects and descended on him, burrowing into his fur.

“Mergen!” Lu Xu yelled.

“Go!”

The gray wolf was instantly overwhelmed by the sea of black insects. An Lushan burst into the courtyard, a second pair of massive arms erupting from his back. The arms swelled in size and made a grab for Lu Xu, who vaulted up the wall and flipped out of his reach. He hesitated at the top, wanting to go back for Mergen, but An Lushan's demonic arms were already grasping for him.

The gray wolf lunged, sinking his fangs into one demonic arm. But in the next moment, he was sent flying by another explosion of flames. Lu Xu made up his mind: Transforming into the white deer, he galloped into the darkness.

An Lushan wrapped his demonic arms around the gray wolf's throat, choking off his air. Mergen couldn't stop trembling as countless venomous insects crawled out of his fur. An Lushan hurled him to the ground, where he convulsed and whimpered in pain.

The swarm of insects skittered over the earth, coming together to form a pair of gu apes.

"We were just about to alert you, sir," the first one said. "We came across some exorcists outside and thought they'd make a move tonight."

An Lushan scoffed. Retracting his flaming demonic arms into the split-open expanse of his back, he commanded, "Lock him up. Keep careful watch over him; I'll interrogate him tomorrow myself."

On a distant rooftop, Lu Xu gasped as he shifted back into human form. A cluster of dark flames burst to life in front of him, taking the shape of a man. After a moment of shock, he recognized Yang Guozhong.

“Xie Yu?” Lu Xu asked.

“I was just about to rescue the two of you,” Yang Guozhong said in a deep voice. “What does Li Jinglong have up his sleeve? Surely he wouldn’t let you simply march to your deaths like this.”

As Lu Xu studied Yang Guozhong warily, he continued, “Where did Li Jinglong go?”

Lu Xu drew in a breath, gripping one of Mergen’s nailhead arrows tight.

“You want to avenge your parents? Even if you attack me now, you wouldn’t be able to kill me.”

“Don’t be nervous.” A voice whispered into Lu Xu’s ear—Qiu Yongsi, speaking to him via spiritual technique. *“Ask him where he hid Ye Ming’s corpse, and he’ll leave you alone.”*

“Where did you hide Ye Ming’s corpse?” Lu Xu asked coldly.

Yang Guozhong took an involuntary step back. Voice shaking, he asked, “Who told you about that?”

“Someone will deal with you eventually,” Lu Xu said. Turning away from Yang Guozhong, he strode to the other end of the roof, leapt lightly down, and disappeared into an alley.

Yang Guozhong stood stunned. He breathed raggedly, hatred burning in his eyes.

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Chapter 101:
The Galaxy

VIRTUE APOTHECARY on the main avenue of Luoyang was about to close for the evening, with only a solitary doctor remaining in case of emergencies. After a thorough inspection of the sick man, Hongjun saw that his body was being eaten away by festering wounds, and that the vital energies in his meridians were nearly depleted.

“He’s beyond saving,” the doctor said. “Young men nowadays are too happy to waste away in brothels. He deserves to bear the consequences of his own actions—and you should hurry home before it gets dark.”

“What sickness is this?” Hongjun didn’t know of any illness that manifested with such symptoms.

“Don’t touch him.” He’d seen the way Hongjun had felt the sick man’s pulse and assumed this young man came from a family of doctors. “Touch people with open sores on their skin, and you’ll catch what they have as well,” he warned. “Your skin is smooth now; best be careful, or you’ll end up covered in pustules.”

Hongjun gave the doctor an appraising look. After another moment of consideration, he stepped into the apothecary and purchased some herbs, then returned and helped the man up.

“Let’s go. I’ll help you,” he said. He looked up at the doctor. “I’ll take him home and see if I can treat him.”

“Young man, it’s pointless!” The doctor would have continued to persuade him, but Hongjun had already turned away. The doctor huffed in

dissatisfaction—but as this young man had a pretty face and didn't seem to be disrespecting him on purpose, he sighed and let it go.

Halfway back, Hongjun had a thought: *What if Li Jinglong finds him disgusting?* This man had apparently contracted some venereal disease, but Hongjun didn't think he deserved to die. Even so, Li Jinglong was sure to tell him off if he brought the man back. He pondered as he walked—what should he do? What if Li Jinglong refused to let him bring the man inside? He couldn't just leave him on the street, could he? He could already see this turning into an argument.

"Thank you—thank you," the man said as he stumbled forward. Bracing himself for a scolding, Hongjun led him to the abandoned Department of Exorcism headquarters. He'd already thought of a few ways to plead his case with Li Jinglong.

By the time they arrived, Li Jinglong was pacing outside the building, waiting for him to return. When he spotted Hongjun in the distance, he was shocked to find him with an arm around a strange man's shoulders, holding him upright.

"What's going on?!" He hurried over to help the man inside, exclaiming to Hongjun, "I was wondering why you were gone so long!"

Hongjun stammered out his prepared explanation, but Li Jinglong didn't speak a word of complaint. "We should remove his clothes and take a look."

"It's dirty," Hongjun warned. "You shouldn't touch him."

"*You're* the one who shouldn't touch him," Li Jinglong said in exasperation. "Come on, let's wipe him down."

Hongjun was stunned; not only did Li Jinglong refrain from reprimanding him, he even started wiping the man's skin clean himself. The man was covered in ulcers from head to toe; even the gentlest dab with a towel made him scream in pain.

"Almost all his skin is completely raw," Li Jinglong said. "What happened? Normal diseases spread in brothels aren't as brutal as this."

Hongjun cast him a suspicious look. "You've seen those diseases?"

"Some of my less well-off brothers in the Longwu Guard liked to spend their nights with the dancers from foreign caravans. They contracted quite a few diseases afterward, so yes, I've seen them… Sir, what's your name?"

"Wen… Wen Bin," the man groaned. "It itches…"

"Stop scratching," Hongjun said, pushing his hands away. He hurried off to make a medicinal paste to reduce the itching and ulceration.

After carefully removing Wen Bin's pants, Li Jinglong called, "He's fine down here. Doesn't look like that's the problem."

"What do you mean?" Hongjun asked.

After another moment of thought, Li Jinglong pronounced, "It looks like he was poisoned."

"I think so too," Hongjun agreed. "Feel his pulse—it's so weak. There are all these sores on his skin, but it doesn't smell like rot. Instead, there's an odd fragrance."

Li Jinglong had learned the basics of treating bruises and internal injuries during his time in the Longwu Guard. While he wasn't as knowledgeable as Hongjun when it came to medicine, he could broadly

distinguish between diseases. He paused before asking Wen Bin, “What was her name?”

“I—I don’t remember. There were too many…”

They laid Wen Bin on the bed, stripped of all his clothing. He was a tall man—almost as tall as Li Jinglong—and even his raw, weeping skin couldn’t obscure the fact that he was exceptionally well-built, with broad shoulders and a sturdy waist. In fact, he might have been even more handsome than Li Jinglong, though he lacked the chief’s gallant aura. A man like this should have had no shortage of beautiful women eager to spend time with him—and if he lacked funds, some might be happy to make him their kept man.

“Speak clearly,” Li Jinglong said. “We’re trying to save your life here.”

Wen Bin itched terribly, an excruciating pain like ants crawling through the marrow of his bones. He groaned. “In the Galaxy—a week ago, I met Xiangyu…”

“Xiangyu—as in *taro*?” Hongjun asked in curiosity.

Spotting the medicine in Hongjun’s hands, Wen Bin begged, “As in *fragrant jade*… Give me the medicine… Please… Give it to me—”

His broken cries made the corners of Li Jinglong’s mouth twitch. Hongjun wore a blank expression—Wen Bin sounded exactly like he had when he’d pleaded with Li Jinglong in bed.

“I’ll head to the Galaxy for a look,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun started; there was no way he was letting Li Jinglong go to a brothel alone. He hastily smeared the paste over the ulcers on Wen Bin’s skin and ran after Li Jinglong, who turned to him with a smile. “Afraid I’ll be tempted? It’s not like I’m—”

“I’m *so* curious.” Hongjun hooked an arm around Li Jinglong’s shoulders and pulled him close, making a great show of his irrepressible interest as they walked out together.

Li Jinglong asked around for directions to the Galaxy; everyone told him to cross Tianjin Bridge and look for an opening in the cliff surrounded by people. These instructions baffled Hongjun. Soon after crossing the bridge, however, they spotted a large group of people waiting around a hole cut into a cliff face on the other side. It looked quite ordinary, with a plaque above it bearing the words *The Galaxy.*

Both stopped short at the sight. Was this place a brothel or a mausoleum? As Hongjun craned his neck for a better look, he caught the eye of several lecherous men milling outside.

“Oho, looks like I’ve found a sweet little piece already. What’s your name, darling? Let’s go out for some wine!”

Li Jinglong’s face darkened instantly. Worried he was about to beat someone up, Hongjun whispered, “The case—the case is our priority here.”

He didn’t spend any more time looking around before dragging Li Jinglong inside the pitch-dark tunnel. As their eyes adjusted, they heard music and unfettered laughter coming from further in. Li Jinglong realized with a shock: Luoyang’s brothels were all underground!

Rumor had it that the empress Wu Zhao had abhorred prostitution. She had ordered a thorough inspection of Luoyang to remove them during her reign, forcing many to relocate underground. The Galaxy was built into a section of the massive canal dug under the orders of Emperor Yang of Sui, the last ruler of the previous dynasty. Before the wide and well-ventilated

underground canal could be made use of, however, Emperor Yang was hanged, and the project abandoned.

After they walked just a short way, their surroundings suddenly brightened.

“Wow,” Hongjun marveled. He squinted, almost blinded by the lights—just as every boy was during his first visit to this place.

The Galaxy was nothing like the seedy brothel they’d expected. Before them stretched an entire underground metropolis. Wooden buildings rose on either side of a long avenue, hung with red lanterns that glowed with mesmerizing golden light. No sun shone here; there was no day or night in this place, only the eternal brightness of the lanterns, casting a dreamlike glow over streets crowded with people drinking, flirting, and reclining on carpets to watch ladies dance. It resembled a marketplace—a vast and teeming marketplace, where flesh was sold along with lodging.

Indeed, shops lined the street as far as the eye could see. From the size of the bustling crowds, Li Jinglong estimated no less than ten thousand patrons had flocked to this underground haven. Quaint buildings resembling those of the Central Plains lined the left side, while the right was a forest of tents in a foreign style. Thick, sprawling carpets from the Western Regions were laid out before many of them, piled high with pillows. As they walked, they watched several local men push foreign women down onto these carpets and take them right then and there.

Hongjun had never seen anything so wanton; he felt dizzy at the sight. He was doubly relieved now that he hadn’t let Li Jinglong come alone. Li Jinglong had visited the Spring Oriole, but that was considered a refined and

elegant establishment. When had he ever barged into a place like this, where people spent money like water and brazenly indulged their basest urges?

“Hello, young man!” A group of foreign women, catching sight of Hongjun, descended on them in a flurry of color. He shrank behind Li Jinglong, wary.

Li Jinglong’s expression shifted but he tried his best to act the part of a charming patron as he asked one of the ladies, “Is there a Miss Xiangyu here?”

To his surprise, the women rolled their eyes and drifted away. Li Jinglong called after them, “What? Is there something wrong with her?”

“Something’s wrong with *you*,” one of the women said with a laugh. “There are so many women here—how would we know which one is Xiangyu?”

Hongjun laughed; the ladies had a point. It was rare for someone to get the better of Li Jinglong. He had no choice but to continue down the street with Hongjun, hunting for their quarry.

“Look, the ladies here are all quite picky,” Li Jinglong said to Hongjun. “Be careful not to stare and don’t appear overly curious. Just act like you’re strolling down a normal street.”

“All right,” Hongjun said reluctantly.

They tried their best to act like locals, resisting the urge to gawp. As they passed a plump foreign merchant’s stall, the owner yelled, “Ha!”

Hongjun jumped in fright, and the man laughed so hard his flabby flesh jiggled. Several foreign women with heavy makeup on their faces and bells around their ankles sauntered over, jingling, and yanked Li Jinglong and

Hongjun away. Li Jinglong hastily waved them off, pushing a girl's wrist down to free himself.

As they walked on, Hongjun glanced at the Han-style buildings on the left side of the street. At the sound of a sharp whistle, he looked to the right to see a tall, leanly built foreigner, naked from the waist up and flushed in the face. Something about him immediately reminded Hongjun of Mergen.

The man waved at him, beckoning him over. While Li Jinglong asked some new passersby for information, Hongjun stepped closer. "I'm looking for someone—"

"Are you Han?" the man asked, leading Hongjun into a tent.

When Hongjun nodded, the man said, "I'm Shiwei."

So that's why he reminds me of Mergen. Hongjun was about to ask more when the man said, "I noticed you a while ago. Who's the guy with you?"

"He's my lover."

"Oh? Shall we ask him to join us?" The man yanked his belt free, and his loose white pants slid to the floor. "Pay me however much you want, Gege will show you a good time…"

He pulled Hongjun roughly into his arms and moved in to kiss him.

Li Jinglong was asking around in front of the tent when Hongjun ran out screaming. Before he could figure out what had happened, a Shiwei man strolled out after him, his erection on full display.

"It won't hurt," the Shiwei man said with a grin, flicking his proud member in a gesture that said, *See?*

"Did he touch you?" Li Jinglong asked.

“No! I just misunderstood…”

The Shiwei man looked at the pair of them. “How about a threesome?”

“So tiny, yet you’re trying to make money off it,” Li Jinglong said, letting his gaze drift down. “I’ll pass—I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

The man gaped at him.

Hongjun laughed so hard he almost fell over. He grabbed Li Jinglong’s hand and made a break for it, dragging Li Jinglong behind him.

“Head toward the end of the street,” Li Jinglong said. “Apparently there’s a tavern halfway down where information is traded. We can ask around there.”

Hongjun heard yet another whistle. This time, he looked over to see a young Semu man, his naked body slicked with oil. A gold ring gleamed around the base of his cock. He beckoned to Hongjun. “Are you coming?”

Hongjun pretended to be deaf. *Why are they all going for me? Go after Li Jinglong instead!*

“No,” Li Jinglong said, pitching his voice higher. “We’re eunuchs, so we can’t come.”

Once again, Li Jinglong had rendered a man speechless.

Hongjun found Li Jinglong hilarious when he ran his mouth. As they crossed an intersection, more people whistled at them, the trills rising and falling in waves. Hongjun kept his eyes on the road, too embarrassed to look up.

“Hey there, handsome lads!” another young man called. “Come on in!”

Li Jinglong pulled Hongjun to his left side, offering the young man a smile as they sped past. The moment Hongjun turned, someone whistled at

him again. This time, it was a Tokharian man who spoke to him in elegant Persian. Hongjun recognized the lyrics from a poem he'd heard A-Tai sing before. Written by a woman confined to her boudoir, the words meant: *O beautiful young man, won't you come to my window?*

Li Jinglong yanked Hongjun back to his right side. The whistling at last died down as they exited the area where the foreign male prostitutes plied their trade. The lilting trills of the men were replaced with the crisp jingling of bells from the foreign women leaning against their tents, lightly shaking their wrists at anyone passing by. In the Han buildings on the other side, girls in resplendent gowns glanced lazily toward the street, waving stiff round fans.

"Why are they all so interested in you?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun laughed, his cheeks slightly pink. "You're right; they don't seem quite as taken with you."

Li Jinglong gave Hongjun a look. After a moment, he said, "Don't you think—"

He suddenly stopped, frowning as if deep in thought. Hongjun arched a brow. "What is it?"

"This fragrance."

Now that he'd mentioned it, Hongjun smelled it too; it was the same as the faint scent they'd picked up on Wen Bin. It had been obscured until now by the thick aroma of foreign spices, only gradually becoming apparent here in the center of the Galaxy.

"I'll go take a look," Li Jinglong said. "You wait here."

Restaurants and taverns occupied the middle of the long street of the Galaxy, crowded alongside several nondescript shops that sold aphrodisiacs. No one solicited customers here. While Li Jinglong stepped into the first of the restaurants in search of information, Hongjun sniffed the air, trying to pin down the source of the smell.

Another whistle sounded nearby, and he turned to see a man on the second floor of a nearby building, wearing a thin robe that exposed his chest. A sword was sheathed at his waist. Setting a foot on the railing, the man drunkenly studied Hongjun, who grew nervous again under his gaze.

“You come here alone?” he asked.

Hongjun took a few steps back and looked up at the man in silence.

“You’re pretty,” the man murmured. His gaze was strangely tender. “Do you drink? Come up for some wine, my young friend.”

Hongjun could tell at a glance this man was versed in martial arts. His figure, with his leanly muscled chest and abdomen, resembled Lu Xu’s but on a larger frame. A jar of wine dangled from his right hand, and he shook it at Hongjun, gesturing for him to come up for a drink.

Considering this man had called him *friend*, Hongjun didn’t think he was trying to solicit him. He carried a sword and seemed like a traveler of the jianghu, so after a moment’s thought, Hongjun willingly went upstairs.

“Do you have money?” the man asked Hongjun. “Help me pay for the wine.”

Now Hongjun saw why he’d been invited: The man had run out of money to drink. He took out some silver and called for the waiter to bring more wine. The man—whose unshaven jaw only added to his slovenly air—

said his thanks once the wine was served, though Hongjun wasn't sure whether he was thanking him or the waiter.

After a few mouthfuls, the man asked, "Why aren't you out there enjoying yourself?"

"I'm looking for someone," Hongjun said. "Sir, what's your name?"

"My name?" The drunk man chuckled. "If I say it, you'll get a real shock."

Hongjun laughed with him. "Tell me, and we'll see."

The man leaned lopsidedly against the table, almost falling out of his seat. "Who are you looking for? The Galaxy is made up of thousands of stars; how can you tell them apart?"

"I'm looking for a girl named Xiangyu," Hongjun said. "Have you seen her around?"

"Xiangyu, eh…?" The man trailed off. "I've seen her, but I've never slept with her. Get some more wine for me, thanks."

Hongjun noticed how quickly he was drinking and said, "If you keep going like that, your bladder's going to burst."

"You're right. Hand me that chamber pot over there."

Speechless, Hongjun obliged.

The man, sitting cross-legged on his chair in nothing but a dark-blue bathrobe, pushed the hem aside without an ounce of shame and urinated into the chamber pot he was holding.

Back in Chang'an, Hongjun had seen quite a few people drink themselves unconscious—not to mention the drunks who made a ruckus on

the streets until they were arrested—so the sight wasn't so bizarre to him. "Where did you see Xiangyu?"

"Over that way…" The man pointed eastward with an unsteady finger, then said, "Wait, I got it wrong. The other side…"

"I'll buy two more jars of wine if you take me there now."

"Deal!"

Hongjun led his new acquaintance downstairs and waited for Li Jinglong outside the tavern. The drunk slung an arm around Hongjun's shoulders and sagged into him. This man was overly friendly, perhaps, but Hongjun didn't sense any sexual undertones. He wasn't afraid Li Jinglong would be jealous; everyone in the Department of Exorcism treated each other with the same level of familiarity. It was fine as long as there were no ulterior motives.

After asking around at all the nearby restaurants, Li Jinglong returned. Upon seeing a strange man hanging off Hongjun, he barked out, "Hey, let him go! Who are you?!"

The man looked up from behind his disheveled curtain of hair, his gaze unfocused as he squinted at Li Jinglong's face.

Stunned, Li Jinglong exclaimed, "Taibai-xiong?!"

The man hummed as he set his palms on Hongjun's shoulders and pushed him toward Li Jinglong. "Xiao-Long…? Hm… You two know each other? Now there's a coincidence."

Hongjun stared at the man. Li Jinglong's voice seemed to fade away as he said something that sounded like, "Let me introduce you. Hongjun, this is Li Bai…"

At that moment, Hongjun’s world came crashing down.

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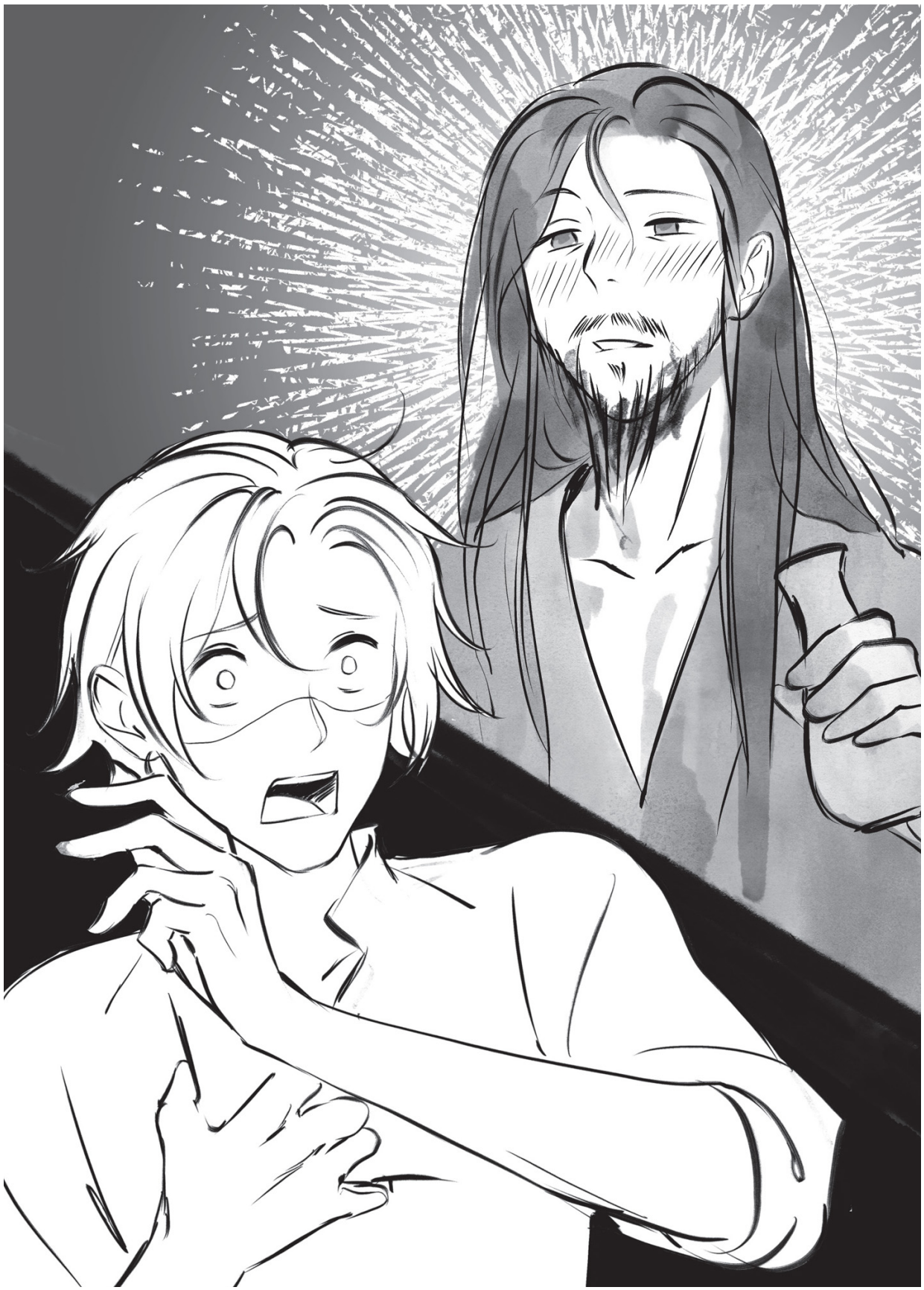

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Chapter 103:
The Demon’s Inner Demons

THE GANG was already assembled and waiting when Lu Xu returned to Lanling Amber. “It went smoothly,” he said, finishing his report with a sigh. “They took Mergen.”

“Mergen, huh?” A-Tai laughed. “Not ‘the big wolf’? You’ve become so familiar—sad he’s gone now, are we?”

Still disconcerted, Lu Xu snapped, “It’s just a name. Focus!”

Ashina Adarvan patted Lu Xu on the shoulder, urging him to relax. “Everyone agreed to Mergen’s plan, including him—he’ll be fine.”

“Let’s wait for Zhao Zilong to report back from the barracks,” Lu Xu replied.

“A jewel? How strange,” Qiu Yongsi mused. He turned to A-Tai. “Does the sacred flame of Zoroastrianism take the form of a jewel?”

“I asked Li Guinian-shixiong about it earlier today,” A-Tai answered. “We don’t know for sure—the sacred flame has been lost too long. We’ll need more proof to be certain.”

After some thought, Ashina Adarvan said, “Even if the jewel’s not the sacred flame, it must be a holy item. Those Göktürks plundered quite a few of our treasures.”

Lu Xu nodded, heaving a long sigh. Mergen’s dreams of his tragic past resurfaced in his memory, along with the words Qiu Yongsi had spoken through the whisper projection technique once he’d escaped to the roof, and

Yang Guozhong's reaction to them. He felt restless and ill at ease. "Let's just wait for news from the carp yao, then," he repeated.

While the exorcists huddled together to discuss next steps, A-Tai turned to Ashina Adarvan. "Go grab a copy of the holy scriptures; let's see how many treasures are lost."

Some time later, Lu Xu descended the stairs and wandered into the rear courtyard. As he stepped out into the late-spring night, he felt weighed down by complicated emotions. Everything had gone according to plan—yet he still couldn't help worrying when he saw Mergen fall into their enemies' hands.

"Ho, little deer." Qiu Yongsi, his long and lanky figure wrapped in a white robe after his bath, was laying out some talismans he'd just made to dry. He smiled at Lu Xu. "Don't let your worries keep you up tonight."

"That's none of your business," Lu Xu said coolly. He was about to stalk off when he remembered something. "Who's Ye Ming?"

"Ye Ming, as in *brightness at night*." Qiu Yongsi put a hand over his throat as if choking himself, then craned his neck, miming a roar. "An alternate way to write his name would be Ye for *choke* and Ming for *make a sound*. He was a dragon who presided over time."

"Time?" Lu Xu echoed.

"There's a place called the Dragon-Quelling Tower, in which jiao, dragons, and great serpents are confined," Qiu Yongsi explained. "Long ago, a war broke out between primordial deities. All dragons who violated the laws of heaven were locked inside this tower."

"What about the others?"

“The others were deemed innocent, of course, free to swim in the seas or roam the mountains as they pleased.”

Lu Xu had heard from Hongjun that Qiu Yongsi was on a mission to recapture Xie Yu and seal him in this tower. “Xie Yu alone has caused so much chaos,” he said. “If this tower collapsed, it would be a great calamity.”

“When the time comes, we may have no choice but to let it collapse.” Qiu Yongsi laughed. “It would save me a lot of work.”

Lu Xu looked back at him, baffled.

“There was once a divine dragon in the tower named Ye Ming,” Qiu Yongsi explained. “Thanks to his powers, time flows very slowly in the tower, at a different pace from the outside world. Xie Yu killed Ye Ming when he left, destroying the time barrier—and he took Ye Ming’s corpse with him.”

“Why would asking him about this dragon make him so…”

“Because Ye Ming was his adoptive father,” Qiu Yongsi replied grimly. “His inner demons are born from his murder of Ye Ming.”

“But he was already planning to become a demon from the start.”

“Ah, but demons are plagued by inner demons too—everyone is. You have to face your inner demons head-on sometimes, so that no one can control you,” Qiu Yongsi said. “Now you see there are times when even Xie Yu is afraid.”

Lu Xu considered this in silence as Qiu Yongsi continued, “What would yours stem from, I wonder? Hatred toward Xie Yu, or your feelings toward Mer—”

“I’m done here.” This was the last thing Lu Xu wanted to talk about; he turned to leave the yard. Qiu Yongsi smiled serenely as he stormed off.

Lu Xu stopped and looked back at Qiu Yongsi from underneath the eaves. “Hongjun’s taken quite a liking to you,” he said.

“I like him too,” Qiu Yongsi replied in a teasing tone. “But I like pretty girls more.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Lu Xu. Then, “Thank you.”

As Lu Xu turned away again, Qiu Yongsi said, “There’s a knot in the wolf’s heart that cannot be untangled.”

“I know,” Lu Xu responded. “The same goes for you.”

Qiu Yongsi merely hummed in agreement.

Lu Xu returned to his room and shut the door firmly behind him.

If Hongjun had been growing weary after wandering the Galaxy so long, he was instantly shocked awake by Li Jinglong’s introduction of Li Bai. He had no idea what time it was on this underground street that was both a black market and an unsleeping city in its own right. *I met Li Bai, and I asked him if he had to pee after drinking so much… I handed him a chamber pot, and he took a leak right in front of me…*

Hongjun felt the world spin around him, his heart beating so fast he was close to passing out. “Uh…” he stammered. “M-Master Li Bai, please forgive my disrespect. This insignificant plebian failed to recognize your illustrious visage…”

Li Jinglong looked on, speechless.

Li Bai slouched against the wall of the alley, so drunk he'd dozed off on his feet. Hongjun's eyes shone with admiration, surprise, and irrepressible joy as he studied the snoring Li Bai. *It's really Li Bai, in the flesh!*

"Get me a bucket of water," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun looked at him, scandalized. "Get it yourself! I have to take care of Taibai-xiong."

"Fine," Li Jinglong said. "Then I'll fetch one and dump it over his head."

"Absolutely not!" Hongjun cried. "How dare you? I'll fight you to the death!" When Li Jinglong came back with the promised bucket, he said, aghast, "Wait… You're really gonna do it?!"

"Well, what do you suggest, then?" Jealousy overcame Li Jinglong; he felt like the bucket wasn't filled with water, but vinegar.

"We can wait till he wakes up on his own!"

"No way. He used to fall asleep like this all the time, and we'd pour water on him to rouse him. You'll see; he'll want more to drink as soon as he wakes up."

"No, no, no! Don't—!" As Hongjun yelped in alarm, Li Jinglong upended the entire bucket of water over Li Bai's head.

Li Bai woke up immediately, calling, "Bring in the wine!"

Li Jinglong gestured at him and shot Hongjun a look that said *I told you so.* Meanwhile, Hongjun was hastily explaining, "It wasn't me, Taibai-xiong…"

"Help me up," Li Bai said, his head clearly throbbing. When Li Jinglong motioned for Hongjun to help, Hongjun was so excited he was

practically shaking.

“Take my prized horse and furs worth a thousand gold; have the boy trade them for fine wine—” Li Bai slurred.

“—and together we’ll drown out the sorrows of centuries old.”[9] Li Jinglong and Hongjun continued the poem in unison.

Li Bai smiled tiredly. Finally, Li Jinglong finished his introduction: “Taibai-xiong, this is Hongjun.”

“Whatever his name is, I don’t care.” Li Bai waved dismissively. “Do you have money, Xiao-Long? Lend me some.”

“Not before we talk business,” Li Jinglong said. “We’ll discuss money when we get back.”

Resigned, Li Bai allowed himself to be dragged along.

“Where’s Xiangyu?” Li Jinglong asked. “Hongjun says you promised you’d help look for her.”

“Hongjun… Hm.” Li Bai squinted at him and muttered, “You… Are you married?”

Li Jinglong’s heart stuttered before picking up speed again, beating so violently it nearly leapt out of his chest.

Hongjun’s lips twitched. “I am.”

Li Jinglong’s heart slowed somewhat.

Laughing boisterously, Li Bai slapped Hongjun on the back. “My friend’s wife just gave birth to a daughter, so he asked me to help look around for a fitting husband.”

“I don’t like girls,” Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong's racing heart finally returned to normal, settling comfortably back into his chest.

"Is that so? My friend is also a poet."

"Oh? Would I know him?" Hongjun asked curiously. Li Jinglong felt nerves come over him again.

"His poems are quite good. He's called Du Fu."[10]

"Never heard of him."

Li Bai waved a hand, muttering to himself as he led Li Jinglong and Hongjun further down the street. The fragrance, faint moments ago, became increasingly potent as they approached a brothel with a plaque above the door that read *House of Peerless Beauty.*

"Once we go in," Li Jinglong whispered in Hongjun's ear, "be careful what you say."

Hongjun nodded. He'd already forgotten why they'd come. "Can we have Taibai-xiong stay the night later? I want to talk with him some more."

Li Jinglong felt a headache coming on. *What can you possibly talk about with a drunkard?* Li Bai was drunk more often than he was sober, and even in his rare moments of lucidity, he never discussed poetry. Occasionally, when inspiration struck, he would dash off a poem, then immediately start drinking again. With a few notable exceptions—Wang Lun,[11] for example, with whom he bantered and drank—he rarely spoke very long with anyone.

"Whatever you want," Li Jinglong said. "Keep an eye on him; make sure he doesn't draw that sword."

Hongjun nodded, and the trio walked into the House of Peerless Beauty. It was a lavishly decorated establishment, yet there was not a single

patron in sight. Within the main hall, four flights of stairs led down to a sunken central area, in the middle of which sat a man in black.

Catching sight of him, Li Jinglong cursed internally. *They knew we were coming.*

Hongjun was shocked, too, but for a different reason. The man was extremely dashing. Despite his delicate features, he had none of the naivete of a young man, nor did he exhibit the sharp, warrior-like aura of a man like Li Jinglong. Hongjun had met many good-looking men in his life, but this fellow, with his willowy brows, defined nose, deep-set eyes, full lips, and skin as fair as his eyes were black, was the most handsome of them all, the embodiment of beauty itself.

Around him gathered a crowd of stunningly gorgeous women in luxurious gowns. The sight brought to mind a meadow of flowers in bloom, wreathing a man so handsome he was nearly divine. It was almost too much to take in at once.

“Marquis of Yardang,” the man said by way of greeting. “Welcome to my humble establishment.”

Li Jinglong smiled. “Forgive me for skipping the pleasantries. How did you know I’d come here today?”

“I have my ways, naturally.” The man was speaking to Li Jinglong, but his gaze was fixed on Hongjun. “Let’s be friends. My name is Wan Jue, but you can call me Xiao-Wan.”

Li Jinglong narrowed his eyes. “Where are your brothers?”

“Wine. Lust. Greed. Wrath.” Wan Jue selected a cup and held it out to Li Jinglong. “You should’ve already figured out who I am, Marquis. My

eldest brother is busy in the city, so why don't you have a seat? He'll come when he's done with his business, and we can all have a chat."

Wan Jue was so handsome Hongjun couldn't help peeking at him a few more times. Yet he felt nothing toward this beautiful man; after all, he was Li Jinglong's now, and to him, the man he loved was the most handsome of all. Wan Jue's face was near perfect, but it left him cold.

Li Jinglong looked around with an easy smile before settling down on the steps opposite Wan Jue.

"Ladies," Wan Jue said, "shouldn't you make our esteemed guests comfortable?"

The lovely girls flanking Wan Jue glided over to surround them on the steps. Hongjun glanced at Li Jinglong, wondering if he would be tempted, but Li Jinglong appeared entirely unruffled.

Li Jinglong scanned the girls. He was certain all of them were yaoguai, but he couldn't guess their original form. *This scent… Could they be flower yao?*

"As grateful as I am for the hospitality, I imagine you've lured us here because you have something to say," he began. "Let's get straight to the point."

"Don't worry," Wan Jue said. "I won't offer you wine made by my eldest brother."

Li Bai, silent since he sat down, suddenly perked up. "There's wine? Bring it here!"

The women started. Tentatively, one asked, "Li Bai? Are you the poet Li Bai, sir?"

“Yes, yes.” Li Bai waved distractedly. “Where’s the wine?”

“Ah!”

“Li Bai!”

“Master Li Bai!”

And that’s enough from all you yaoguai! Filled with rage, Hongjun snapped, “Stay away from Taibai-xiong!”

Wan Jue, too, was surprised to find the situation spinning out of his control. The flower yao in the hall all flocked toward Li Bai, while even more hurried downstairs upon hearing the others’ shrieks, clamoring, “Li Bai’s here? Where is he?!”

The room exploded with chatter as Wan Jue yelled, “Shut up, all of you!”

“Li Bai—” The yao crowding into the room were all on the verge of tears, overwhelmed with emotion. One of the girls said, “I thought I saw you in the garden a couple days ago. I can’t believe it really was you!”

“Ah—okay, okay…”

“I love you so much, Li Bai!”

“I love me, too… Now, where’s the wine?”

A girl hurried over with a jar, imploring, “Won’t you please compose us a poem?”

“I’m not in the mood right now.”

The group of tittering girls surrounded Li Bai, completely ignoring Li Jinglong, Hongjun, and Wan Jue. The three men looked at one another, speechless.

“You need to put in more work, my friend. Your looks aren’t enough to rein in these yao,” Li Jinglong quipped. “A couple more years of cultivation ought to do it.”

Hongjun stifled a laugh as Wan Jue looked daggers at Li Jinglong. “The guest you brought with you today has nullified my powers. It can’t be helped.”

Tired of beating around the bush, Li Jinglong demanded, “Where’s the divine kun?”

He scanned the hall, weighing the situation as Wan Jue considered his question. The girls here were all yao in human form, but he sensed that they weren’t that powerful. If worse came to worst, he’d have no trouble finishing them off. The gu ape sitting across from him was a thornier problem, but if he teamed up with Hongjun, who could trap the insects in his pentacolor sacred light, they should have nothing to fear.

“That’s a valuable piece of information. What are you offering for it?” Wan Jue’s smirk was charmingly wicked. “Marquis, before I left Chang’an, my third brother—Greed—took pains to remind me that I should let you state your price.”

Was this true? Countless thoughts flitted through Li Jinglong’s mind. Wan Jue’s side had likely guessed someone from Yaojin Palace would try to rescue the divine kun, but there was no way they had predicted the rescuer would be him. They were bluffing.

“What does the governor want?” Li Jinglong asked.

Wan Jue slapped his thigh. “Quite straightforward, aren’t you, my lord?”

“Master Li Bai…” one of the girls simpered.

“Stay away from him—and don’t pull his hair,” ordered Hongjun.

Finally, Wan Jue lost his temper. “That’s enough!”

The girls quieted, but from their dreamy stares, it was clear they remained fervent in their devotion to Li Bai. The poet was in his forties, yet he didn’t look his age; he had a trim figure and wore an unruly beard like an unkempt vagabond’s, which somehow only added to his free-spirited charm. On top of his good looks, his considerable talent and great fame instantly made him the center of attention.

“He was in the tavern just outside,” Hongjun said. “Haven’t you seen him around?”

“We aren’t allowed out!” A girl pouted.

“That’s right! We can’t take a step out this door!” Another girl shot Hongjun a scathing glare. “We heard he was in the Galaxy a few days ago, but no one let us out for a look.”

“Well, I brought him here,” Hongjun said.

“So what?”

“So if I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have gotten to see him.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything,” Hongjun said. “Just give him some space and stop throwing yourselves all over him.”

Li Jinglong and Wan Jue had ceased exchanging barbs and gotten down to business. Wan Jue said flatly, “The governor wants the nightmares currently residing within this boy. You can exchange *him* for the divine kun.”

“I’ll think about it—give me some time. Hongjun, Taibai-xiong, time to go.”

“Yessir!” Hongjun chirped.

The yao girls sighed in disappointment. Li Bai took two more gulps of wine before swaying to his feet. Li Jinglong gripped his arm to steady him as he stumbled, and the trio made for the door without another word.

“Marquis of Yardang,” Wan Jue said. “You can’t touch me—and vice versa. I advise you not to go looking for trouble.”

Li Jinglong turned back, studying Wan Jue with narrowed eyes. He suddenly remembered the man named Wen Bin currently recuperating on the Department’s premises, and realization dawned.

He nodded politely at Wan Jue, and the three stepped back into the street.

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Chapter 104:
Demonic Flames Corrode the Heart

THE QUIET SOBS of a boy echoed in a dark, gloomy cave, rising and falling amid the grief-filled howls of the wolves huddled around him. The boy curled on the cold ground, a puddle of tears and snot under his cheek and an arrow impaling his chest, its sharp head protruding from his back. Uncontrollable tremors racked his body, and a low whimper rattled in his throat—the last sounds of a creature nearing death. On the walls of the cave above him was painted a vivid mural—*The Jataka of the Deer King.*

The deer king, its snow-white coat adorned with nine tufts of different colors, stepped out from the mural, and the wolves cleared a path leading to young Mergen, sprawled face down on the ground.

“For humans, living in the mortal world is like being tangled within a thicket of thorny vines,” the deer said. Its antlers emitted a gentle glow that enveloped the dying boy. The hazy, blue-gray outline of a wounded wolf materialized around Mergen’s body and looked up at the deer.

“Go,” the deer said gently. “Although this thicket of thorns and vines seems boundless, it will eventually come to an end.”

It bowed its head and nuzzled the gray wolf’s neck, the gentle light of its antlers healing the wolf’s wounds. The boy Mergen pushed himself up with difficulty, and the white deer exploded into a galaxy of stars that streamed out of the cave.

Mergen rose and walked out into the forest, melting into the trees under the pale light of dawn.

The first rays of morning light slanted into the Anxi Barracks, falling between Mergen's brows. He opened his eyes and sat up, mind still filled with his dream.

The door of his cell opened, and a tall man outside called, "Mergen. The governor wants you."

Mergen sat in a corner of his cell, the telltale welts of a whip crisscrossing the skin of his bare shoulders. His nailhead arrows had been confiscated, and he had not one spiritual device on him. The chains around his wrists and ankles, forged from rare metals, sent up a series of discordant clangs as he shuffled to the main hall.

An Lushan had dismissed most of his attendants, leaving only two men clad in black standing on either side of him.

"I know your father," An Lushan said without preamble. "Qiyad Baghatur, Anbusi'er—the chieftain of the northern Shiwei tribes."

Mergen raised his head as An Lushan continued, "We fought on different sides of the war. I heard he has a son known as the morning star of the plains." Mergen frowned slightly. "They said the boy later vanished; I figured he went to the Central Plains. Why did you come here?"

"You know very well why I've come, demon."

An Lushan's guffaws shook the couch he sat on. "To kill me? I don't think so."

"To the governor," said one of the black-clad men at his shoulder, "the territory of Qiyad Baghatur's tribe is barely the size of an ant, razed to the ground with a flick of a finger. There are fewer than fifteen thousand people

in your tribe, and not even eight thousand of them are men fit to go to war. Not to mention your tribe ceded territory to the Khitan ten years ago in exchange for peace, so you could recuperate and rebuild."

An Lushan sneered. "One command from me, and fifty thousand cavalrymen will ride northward. We'll wipe your tribe off the map in a month."

"You're right." Mergen nodded. "In fact, you wouldn't even need to send any troops. You could just unleash your demonic energy on the banks of the Karsi River, and all the people of my tribe, young and old, would perish."

"I don't believe it will come to that," An Lushan said with a genial smile. "If you join me, your tribe will no longer need to fear for their lives. Years from now, they could be thriving as my most loyal subjects."

"If I told you now that I'm willing to defect to your side, would you believe me?" Mergen asked coldly, studying An Lushan.

The governor bellowed out another beastly laugh. He scrutinized Mergen, then rose from his couch. Letting his hulking figure tower over him, he said in a low voice, "I know what Li Jinglong's searching for. Unfortunately, you've all been looking in the wrong place."

Mergen's eyes widened as An Lushan pressed a palm to his chest. A tendril of demonic energy curled around him. Without warning, the black wisp dove into Mergen's chest and yanked out his heart.

His agonized scream rang through the room.

Mergen's heart emitted a gray-blue glow as corrosive demonic energy rushed into it in an endless stream. Mergen's eyes snapped open, and he stared vacantly at his heart hovering in midair.

“If you could do it, why didn’t you?”

“Your arrows can reach where other weapons cannot.”

“One shot, and you could avenge your mother.”

“I see now!” An Lushan let out a deranged laugh as an image took shape in Mergen’s mind: a younger Mergen on one knee before someone’s sickbed. His hatred from thirteen years ago wove through visions of a sea of blood, twisting into a pulsing web of obsidian veins that gradually wrapped around Mergen’s beating heart.

Mergen convulsed on the ground, unable to speak.

“What lies within the deepest recesses of your soul?” An Lushan’s voice deepened to a guttural rasp.

“Monster…”

“A monster!”

Eyes filled with terror flickered in front of Mergen. He’d accidentally tripped one of his younger brothers while teaching him on the archery range. He extended a hand with a smile, ready to help him up, but the boy scrambled away in fear.

Later, his father’s wives turned cold gazes on him in the tent. His father beckoned him over and slapped him across the face. Mergen took the blow in silence.

The image shifted again. A gray wolf bounded freely across the rooftops of a moonlit Chang’an, carrying Hongjun on his back.

“Mergen?” Hongjun whispered.

“Hm?” The gray wolf slowed and turned its head.

Hongjun signaled him to continue running. "Are you a yao?"

"Of a sort," the gray wolf replied. "This ability hasn't appeared in my tribe for nearly a century. I don't know exactly what I am, either. Don't tell A-Tai and the others."

The wolf hadn't wanted Li Jinglong to overhear too much of their conversation. When they came to a courtyard, he bounded up the wall and leapt onto the rooftops. The dark clouds over Chang'an slowly parted to reveal a bright moon. The gray wolf ran silently along the rooftops with the young man on his back.

"You won't arrest me, will you?" the wolf asked.

Hongjun laughed and leaned down to the wolf's ear. "I'm half yao, too."

"Hm?" The gray wolf flicked his ear, surprised. "You don't seem like one."

"My dad was a—"

"Shh," the wolf said. "You don't need to tell me. My dad once said there isn't much difference between humans and yao; the only real difference is between good and evil."

The vision shifted. An old shaman wielding a staff murmured in front of a crackling fire. *"What difference is there between humans and yao? The true difference is between good and evil—so what if you are yao?"*

Obsidian flames surged up, thoroughly obscuring the images of Mergen's past. An Lushan formed a seal with his fingers, and the corroded heart—now pitch-black—shot back into Mergen's chest. With a final shudder, Mergen collapsed on the floor.

The carp yao, hiding outside the window, peeked into the room once before slowly retracting his head.

“Get up.” One of the black-clad men supported Mergen as he slowly got to his feet.

An Lushan looked at him with interest. “If you want to kill the emperor of Great Tang, why have you not already done so?”

Mergen’s whole body was bathed in black flames, which slowly sank into his skin and disappeared. He raised his head and met An Lushan’s gaze, his eyes now gleaming with twin clusters of whirling flames as dark as obsidian.

“Where is the last arrow?” An Lushan asked, his voice deep.

The other black-clad man presented a wooden tray holding six nailhead arrows. Mergen hovered a hand over the tray, and the arrows began to rattle as they vibrated.

At the same moment, the seventh arrow—now bound to Lu Xu’s wrist with a length of red string—started trembling. It rose in the air, pointing resolutely in one direction.

A-Tai, Ashina Adarvan, and the others were huddled in discussion when Lu Xu hurried out and motioned for them to come look. The nailhead arrows had been forged in ancient times from extremely pure gold from the west. Like Hongjun’s immortal-slaying knives, they were capable of forming a bond with their master. Spiritual devices like these possessed formidable spiritual energy. As for how Mergen had made the arrows recognize him as their master, it remained a mystery.

“He’s starting to summon his arrows,” Lu Xu said.

Mergen had impressed on them that if his arrows moved, it meant he had regained the ability to summon his spiritual device. This was their sign that he’d succeeded in gaining An Lushan’s trust—the first step in their plan.

“I have some not-so-good news,” A-Tai said grimly. “We may need to change our strategy.”

Lu Xu didn’t know what to say.

“We’ve cross-referenced our books and materials based on what you and Mergen saw,” Ashina Adarvan said. “The jewel you saw is indeed the sacred flame, but that’s only one of its many forms. It hasn’t appeared in its entirety. Aside from the Arms of Atar, which you encountered, there are several other manifestations. It will take the form that most suits An Lushan’s needs—whatever allows him to best unleash its power. The next time we strike, the flame may no longer be attached to his back.”

“The sacred flame is shapeless,” A-Tai agreed. “But now, I’m quite certain we can take it back.”

“Then before we strike,” Lu Xu said, “we need to know exactly what An Lushan has done with the sacred flame.”

Qiu Yongsi nodded, looking thoughtful. “An Lushan must be using it for us to have a chance to seal it. We’ll need to prepare a water-based spiritual device for that.”

Maybe, Lu Xu thought, it was fortunate Mergen had been captured by An Lushan. If he had recklessly fought on, it would have only ended in failure.

It was past noon when Hongjun groggily freed himself from Li Jinglong's clinging embrace and rose to check on the others. He and Li Jinglong had fallen into bed the moment they'd returned last night, and Li Bai—who'd come with them—was still snoring in the main hall, his clothes in disarray.

Wen Bin, his condition greatly improved after Hongjun's treatment, was sunbathing in the corridor.

"I'm already feeling so much better," Wen Bin said when he saw Hongjun. "Your medicine worked wonders—young man, you're my savior!"

Hongjun had him stick out his tongue for a look. "You weren't sick; you were poisoned. I'll make you an antidote. It'll help, but whether the poison can be completely neutralized will depend on your luck."

Hongjun went inside to decoct Wen Bin's medicine. After their visit to the House of Peerless Beauty last night, he figured Wen Bin had fallen victim to lust poison from a peony yao—this was the key to making the antidote. Many yao were naturally toxic, and even the yao themselves might not know how to cure the humans they had unwittingly poisoned through intercourse. Capturing this Xiangyu and dragging her back here would be a waste of time and effort. Hongjun had therefore come up with a bold idea: combating poison with poison.

All yao energies corresponded with the eight gates of an ancient system of divination known as the Qimen Dunjia: the Gates of Growth, Harm, Repose, Retreat, Scenery, Death, Fear, and Beginnings. Flower yao, which embodied the aspects of flowering and fruiting, were especially known for their powers of lust and reproduction, which corresponded to the Gate of

Growth. The lesions all over Wen Bin's body were due to the constant ulceration and regrowth of his flesh.

The corpse ghosts, on the other hand, embodied the death of all things and possessed powers corresponding to the Gate of Death. One dose of corpse-ghost poison was enough to instantly transform growth and vitality into death and desolation.

Back in Liang Prefecture, Hongjun had marveled over the effects of the corpse ghosts' poison. He'd asked Liu Fei for some strands of his hair, which he'd burned to ash, as well as a few droplets of blood, which he'd sealed in a vial.

Wen Bin saw Hongjun as a doctor capable of miracles, so he readily agreed to his idea. He'd try anything as long as this damned illness could be treated once and for all.

"I really do love her." Wen Bin still seemed oblivious to the fact that his precious Xiangyu was a yaoguai. "Can you save her too? I'll owe you a debt of gratitude all my life if you do."

Hongjun hummed distractedly as he diluted the corpse poison again and again, fearful of harming Wen Bin. Even if he couldn't cure his malady, he didn't want to accidentally condemn the man to death. He could always observe the effects and slowly increase the dosage.

He added the diluted poison to a cup of wine, which he handed to Wen Bin.

"Being with her was the only time in my whole life I felt like I'd truly fallen in love," Wen Bin said.

"Drink it," Hongjun said. "You talk too much."

Despite his blunt words, he found himself touched by Wen Bin's reminiscence. Just as Wen Bin was about to drink the wine, Li Bai—who had apparently woken up—called, "Wine! There's wine!"

Hongjun yelped, "You can't drink that! It's medicine—"

Li Bai snatched at the cup. Hongjun lunged forward to stop him, but Li Bai was surprisingly quick, faster even than Hongjun, and dodged. It was Hongjun's first time failing to catch a mortal.

Pandemonium ensued in the yard. Fortunately, Li Jinglong had come running when he heard the commotion and intercepted Li Bai's wrist before he could toss the wine back. Between Hongjun and Li Jinglong, the cup was removed from Li Bai's grasp.

"There's more wine in the main hall—help yourself," Hongjun said quickly, then shoved the poisoned wine back into Wen Bin's hand.

Wen Bin drank it all in a gulp, then cried, "I'm dying!"

Everyone turned in shock as he collapsed on the floor, face down. Hongjun immediately dropped to one knee to check on him.

"What medicine did you give him?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun gave a succinct explanation while Li Bai laughed heartily. He walked through the front courtyard, reciting, "The living are but transient guests; the dead are trav'lers homeward bound. Alas, the world is just an inn; everything dust in the wind…"

Li Jinglong started in surprise. "Isn't that the demon-sealing incantation Qing Xiong used?"

Hongjun was confused. "It's his poem!"

“It’s also the demon-sealing incantation though, isn’t it?” Li Jinglong asked doubtfully.

Hongjun nodded. “Yeah.”

“Has Qing Xiong heard this poem before? When did Li Bai write it?”

“He’s in the main hall, so why don’t you ask him yourself?” Hongjun said as he rushed around. “I have a life to save here!”

This finally brought Li Jinglong back to his senses. He propped Wen Bin up and put a finger under his nostrils to check for breathing. “He’s still alive; don’t worry.”

Hongjun watched as purplish-red bruises like those seen on corpses gradually appeared all over Wen Bin’s body, as if engaging in a battle against the ulcers. Wen Bin’s flushed skin slowly darkened. Li Jinglong pressed his glowing palms to Wen Bin’s chest, ready to feed spiritual power into Wen Bin’s heart meridian to help him fight the poison.

Wen Bin’s body spasmed, yet his breathing grew stronger, and the lesions on his skin began to visibly shrink. Compared to the state he was in a moment ago, when he could barely breathe, he already seemed much better. They watched over him until at last his limbs fell still and he opened his eyes.

“That hurt like hell,” he said.

“It worked!” Hongjun exhaled a long sigh of relief.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun helped Wen Bin into a room where he could rest. When Wen Bin tried to drop to his knees, ready to kowtow to Hongjun, Li Jinglong stopped him. “Before you thank him, let me ask you this: How did you happen to meet my Hongjun?”

Hongjun was baffled. Surely their meeting had been a complete coincidence.

Wen Bin racked his brain. “Ah, that’s right, it was that blind man! Nine days ago, I met a blind man who told me I didn’t have long to live. He said when I fell sick, I should visit the doctor at Virtue Apothecary…”

Hongjun was once again amazed by Li Jinglong’s acuity. Li Jinglong seized Wen Bin’s arm, saying in a low voice, “Tell me, what did the blind man look like? What else did he say?”

“That… That’s it.” Wen Bin was still thinking hard. “Do you know him? He…was very pale, almost inhumanly so. I think he said something…”

Furrowing his brow, Li Jinglong recited an incantation and pressed the palm of one hand to Wen Bin’s forehead, taking Hongjun’s with the other.

There was a flash of white light, and Hongjun found himself in Wen Bin’s memories.

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Chapter 105:
Investigating the Garden

WEN BIN was walking swiftly through the marketplace in Luoyang when Yuan Kun, blindfolded and hobbling from his injuries, stumbled and fell into him. As Wen Bin quickly steadied the stranger, the man said to him, “Seven days from now, your life will be at risk. Virtue Apothecary alone can save you. When you come out of it alive, seek me out at Alkaid.”

Wen Bin and Yuan Kun then went their separate ways. The white light retracted, and Li Jinglong and Hongjun were pulled out of Wen Bin’s memory.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Hongjun asked in surprise.

“The ghost king taught me,” Li Jinglong replied. “It only works on some mortals; anyone with spiritual power or even higher than average physical strength will be immune.” He began to pace around the hall, musing, “Alkaid… What could that be?”

“Wait.” Hongjun was still catching up. “How did you even think of doing that?”

“The divine kun can see the future. Nine days ago, he foresaw we’d arrive in Luoyang, so he asked us for help through this man.”

“I can see that now. But what made you think it was a possibility?”

Li Jinglong considered it. “It was Taibai-xiong’s poem.”

This statement left Hongjun as confused as ever.

Li Jinglong could sense, vaguely, that the divine kun's ability to see the future was extremely powerful. If humans, yao, and Mara were all actors on a grand stage, then it was very likely that the divine kun was the only one who could flip the script—in fact, he might even be the one controlling this entire course of events from behind the scenes.

This was why Li Jinglong had raced for Luoyang with Hongjun, instead of staying in Chang'an to deal with An Lushan. He had many questions for the divine kun. At first, he'd only wanted to ask about the past, specifically Mara's history and how it came to be. As they said: *Know thine enemy, and thou shalt go undefeated*. Now, however, he wondered if he ought to ask what the future held, too.

The demon-sealing incantation Qing Xiong had used was a line from Li Bai's poem. Li Jinglong was certain this poem couldn't have been written more than seven years ago—he hadn't heard of it when he first got to know Li Bai. Yet Qing Xiong seemed to have learned it even earlier than that.

Why would Qing Xiong know a poem Li Bai hadn't yet written?

There was only one explanation: The divine kun had learned the incantation while looking into the future. Who had first spoken this incantation? Surely Li Bai hadn't drunkenly sealed a demon. Someone must have instead co-opted this poem for a new spiritual technique.

"I'll explain as we walk," Li Jinglong said. "Let's go."

Hongjun instructed Wen Bin to stay and watch over headquarters. To their surprise, Li Bai—who had imbibed some hair of the dog earlier that morning—was hale and clear-eyed. "Where are you going? Take me with you!"

The poet had trimmed his beard, leaving only dusky sideburns, and combed his hair back. He appeared before them now in dark-blue martial robes with wide sleeves, and had exchanged his sword for a saber that hung at his waist. Charmingly handsome and elegant, he looked nothing like a man in his forties.

Li Jinglong beckoned him over, inviting him to walk with them. When he finished explaining everything, Li Bai seemed unsurprised. “If we happen across any yaoguai, let me kill some, okay?”

This was Li Bai, so of course Hongjun’s answer was something that could be summed up as, *Yes, yes, of course, you’re always right, I’ll protect you no matter what*. Li Jinglong didn’t know whether he should laugh or roll his eyes.

“Well, in that case, let me go get myself a catty of wine first,” Li Bai said.

Thus Hongjun and Li Jinglong were left to cool their heels as Li Bai went and bought his wine.

“The Alkaid the divine kun mentioned is outside the city,” Li Jinglong said to Hongjun. “Make sure you keep an eye on Taibai-xiong.”

“What other spiritual techniques do you know?” Hongjun studied Li Jinglong doubtfully, sure he must have secretly learned more while Hongjun wasn’t looking.

Li Jinglong shrugged, palms up. “Nothing else, really.”

But after some thought, he snapped his fingers and flung out his hands. With a rustle, every arrow in the quiver on his back flew out and scattered in the air.

“Even the nailhead arrow spiritual technique?!” Hongjun was stunned.

“But I can only release the arrows, not call them back.”

The sight of the arrows hurtling through the air was impressive, but once fallen, they had to be collected one by one. As they busied themselves with this, Hongjun asked again, “Anything else?”

“Nothing else. I mean it this time.”

Noticing that Li Jinglong was still looking rather smug, Hongjun left it at that. Perhaps he would show off whatever other tricks he had up his sleeve later.

As the three of them made their way to the city gates, Hongjun thought again about the divine kun’s powers. To think Li Jinglong had come to Luoyang for this purpose. “Perhaps he can tell us about our future.”

“Do you really want to know?” Li Jinglong asked.

While Hongjun hesitated, Li Bai, who had been silent since buying his wine, cut in. “If it were me, I’d rather not.”

Hongjun hummed in immediate agreement. “Of course you’re right.”

Have you lost your wits? Li Jinglong swallowed his complaints. He didn’t want to scold Hongjun, so he instead turned to Li Bai. “Even if someone knows the ending, they usually can’t guess how it came to be.”

“That’s true.” Li Bai smiled. “Whatever else happens, one cannot escape death.”

When the trio arrived at their destination on a hill outside the city, Li Jinglong nudged Hongjun. “Look down there, at the seven heavenly landmarks of Luoyang. We’re at ‘Alkaid,’ aren’t we?”

Hongjun gazed out at the horizon. Seven landmarks stood in the divine capital Luoyang, forming the shape of the Northern Dipper. They stretched from the soaring pillar called the Axis of Heaven, to the Tower of Heaven, all the way to the northern outskirts of the city. The northernmost star in the pattern, Alkaid, was symbolized by Mount Longmen, at the foot of which lay the Longmen Grottoes.

“There’s nothing here…” Li Jinglong hiked to a higher spot and looked around. The Luo River flowed below them just a short distance away.

“Looking at this scenery, inspiration surges within me…” Li Bai said.

Hongjun turned to him, eyes sparkling.

“Taibai-xiong, we’re busy right now,” Li Jinglong said. “Let’s leave the poetry for later.”

“Very well,” Li Bai answered.

For a moment, Hongjun was too outraged to speak. Then he cried, “Do you know what you’ve done? Now there’ll be one less poem that will go down in history!”

Amused, Li Jinglong said, “Poems are less important to me than the safety of Luoyang and the Divine Land. I can compose you one as compensation when I have the time later, okay?”

Can you, though? Hongjun thought doubtfully. But a beat later, his heart stuttered in his chest. He’d always felt Li Jinglong knew how to do everything well. What if it turned out he was better at writing poetry than Li Bai…? *No, no, no, that’s impossible!*

“Compose one now then, if you’re so capable,” Hongjun said, suspicious.

“Later. Focus on the case.”

Li Jinglong finally succeeded in diverting Hongjun’s attention, though he’d made an impossible promise in the process. Who in the world would dare compete against Li Bai when it came to poetry? Hongjun’s look of anticipation made Li Jinglong shiver.

“Could that be the spot you’re looking for?” Li Bai pointed toward a peony garden about fifty paces away. “You said it was flower yao, didn’t you? Maybe they’re hiding themselves in a garden.”

“You’re so smart!” Hongjun marveled.

Li Jinglong was speechless. Not only had he failed to compose a poem, now Li Bai had also shown him up as the star detective of the Department of Exorcism. He gritted his teeth and tried to focus as they arrived at the garden’s gates.

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A potent fragrance wafted toward them the moment they peeked inside. It was late spring and Luoyang was in full bloom, yet there were no visitors in the garden. Several soldiers near the gate rattled their spears and barked, “The garden is closed! Go to another garden if you want to look at flowers!”

Hongjun shot Li Jinglong a sideways glance as they both had the same thought: These soldiers were most likely yao.

“This place is heavily guarded, and the guards seem uneasy,” Li Bai muttered. “Something fishy’s going on here.”

“Brilliant!” Hongjun gushed.

Li Jinglong realized he should’ve left Li Bai to drink himself stupid at the Luoyang department headquarters.

The three men retreated down the path. When they took a furtive look back, they could see the soldiers whispering among themselves. One mounted a horse and took off southward, no doubt to report their intrusion.

“Shall we force our way in?” Li Bai drawled, drawing his saber. Li Jinglong hurriedly shoved the blade back into its sheath. “Hongjun, you’re always asking how I manage to predict our enemies’ moves, so I’ll teach you. Listen up.”

Hongjun glanced at Li Bai, then back at Li Jinglong, before nodding.

Li Jinglong began with a question. “First, how did Wan Jue know we were coming to Luoyang?”

After a moment of pondering, Hongjun realized: “The divine kun!”

Li Jinglong nodded. “That’s right.”

Leaning casually on his saber, Li Bai gazed into the distance. “I’d guess he knew the conversation you had last night was destined to happen,

but he didn’t know how and when you’d arrive in the city.”

Li Jinglong smiled. “So at some point, Wan Jue had the divine kun under his control, and gained a fraction of his ability to predict the future. Next question: If you were Wan Jue, what would you do after last night?”

“Send yao to keep an eye on us,” Hongjun answered with a frown.

“Exactly. Third question: If he learns we’ve discovered his hiding place, what’s the best way to deal with us? Attack us until we retreat? Definitely not—that would just make the situation worse.”

Hongjun was stumped. If Wan Jue learned they’d come here, how would he react? If this garden was really the flower yao’s hideout, he couldn’t just move the entire garden on the spur of the moment, could he?

“Simple,” Li Bai answered casually. “He’d trick you into thinking there’s nothing unusual about this place. *Or* he’d deliberately lay down hints for you to find and set a trap for you here, when their real hiding place is somewhere else.”

“We can eliminate the second possibility.” Li Jinglong looked toward the garden again and said slowly, “We found this based on the divine kun’s message. No one else knows the source of our information, so we can be sure this isn’t a trick.”

“But why do these guards—be they yao or human—look unprepared, like they weren’t expecting us?” Hongjun asked.

“The only possibility is that something went wrong with whatever means Wan Jue is using to keep watch on us,” Li Jinglong said.

Suddenly Hongjun understood. “So Wan Jue sent yaoguai to keep an eye on what we’d do…”

“But something went wrong,” Li Jinglong finished. “From that, we can infer that at least one of our enemy’s subordinates is secretly on our side.”

“Then what should we do now?”

“We’ll break into this peony garden and see what we find,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun clapped a hand to his forehead. “What was the point of that long explanation if we’re just going to fight our way in anyway?”

Li Jinglong quirked a brow. “If we charged straight in, you’d complain I didn’t tell you anything. So I laid everything out—do you have a problem with that too?”

Shaking his head, Hongjun let the matter go. Li Jinglong turned to Li Bai. “I’ll leave the guards outside to you, Taibai-xiong. If we can take care of them, I’d guess we have at least two hours.”

“There’s still a gu ape that hasn’t shown up yet,” Hongjun pointed out.

“He could be anywhere, but he won’t be here. Let’s go!”

Without wasting another moment, Li Jinglong dashed toward the garden. From the moment they’d arrived, the guards had appeared on edge, ready to fire their bows at the slightest provocation. When they spotted Li Jinglong sprinting toward them, they dropped all pretenses, promptly proving Li Jinglong’s theory correct. “Enemy attack! The exorcists are here!”

Hongjun whistled and released his four throwing knives, slicing the arrows streaking toward him into pieces. Before either of them had noticed, Li Bai had snuck all the way to the garden’s entrance. He called, “Can I kill them?”

“Sure…” Li Jinglong hesitated. “I think?”

Before he finished, Li Bai had already slashed one of the guards across the torso. Watching blood spurt from the man's abdomen, Li Jinglong roared, "Why'd you ask if you were going to do it anyway?!"

There were only two guards against three of them, and after this display, Hongjun found himself pitying them. He shouted, "Go easy on them!"

"On it!" Li Bai called. He twirled his saber and stabbed it right into the second guard's thigh as the man shrieked in pain.

Li Bai's moves were unusual—nothing like the more straightforward hack-and-slash techniques of the Central Plains—and he wielded his long, narrow saber like a sword, yet not quite, twisting and parrying with the grace of a dancer.

Hongjun was about to cheer when Li Jinglong snapped, "Come on!"

He yanked on the back of Hongjun's collar, and the two bounded up the outer garden walls in a few steps, then somersaulted into the courtyard on the other side.

The fragrance permeating the air was so thick they were instantly dizzy. They landed near an ornamental rockery that occupied one section of the garden, which was filled with peonies in a riot of colors, each emitting a faint, dark mist.

Two more jabs of Li Bai's saber brought both guards to the ground. They transformed into large monkeys, blood streaming from their wounds. "Monkeys, eh?"

Standing amid the peonies on the other side of the wall, Li Jinglong said, "The books I read claimed flower yao can only take human form

through a special transformation technique; their real bodies must be planted in soil. If my guess is correct, this garden is where they—”

Without warning, a wooden hut in the garden exploded open as several dozen guards stormed out. Startled, Hongjun and Li Jinglong backed away. A shout came from the gate: “Leave them to me!”

Li Bai removed the wineskin fastened to his waist and downed several gulps before charging unsteadily forward. The guards—more monkey yao in disguise—leapt onto the buildings and swiftly climbed the beams, but Li Bai was faster. He moved like a raging gust of wind, felling a guard with each swing of his saber. He flitted easily left and right with his reeling steps, so that the monkey yao couldn’t come near him.

It was Hongjun’s first time witnessing another mortal besides Li Jinglong hold their own against yao, relying on nothing but skill alone. Li Bai wove his way through the troupe of monkey yao, his motions effortless despite the way he swayed on his feet. His saber pierced and stabbed, leaving a trail of bloodied monkey yao in his wake.

“Should we burn the garden?” Li Jinglong suggested.

Just as Hongjun was about to call fire to his fingertips, all the peonies in the garden began spewing dark fumes, their sweet scent choking in the air. Before their astonished eyes, countless fair-skinned women rose naked from the clusters of flowers, turning their bewitching bodies toward them as wanton moans slipped from their lips.

Li Jinglong and Hongjun lapsed into a dumbfounded silence.

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Chapter 106:
A Pool of Wine Among the Earthly Meridians

SENSING DANGER, the peony yao had shifted into their human forms: the beautiful girls accompanying Wan Jue the night before. The magnificent sight of more than a hundred women's tender, lily-white bodies paired with the cloying fragrance of the peonies set Li Jinglong and Hongjun's heads spinning.

Hongjun held his knives ready between his fingers but couldn't seem to throw them. "Uh…"

Li Jinglong's mouth twitched. "Are you hard?"

"No!"

"Then why are you just standing there?!"

Li Jinglong called on the heart lamp as the flower yao rushed toward him; a bright flash of light sent the girls flying. He drew the Sword of Wisdom from the sheath he carried on his back and slashed out in a wide arc as the flower yao screamed and scattered.

"I… It just feels wrong to hurt them!" Hongjun cried. He really couldn't find it within himself to throw his knives into that sea of soft bodies. The guilt of spilling their blood was too much for him to bear.

Exasperated, Li Jinglong cried, "Use your pentacolor sacred light!"

At the reminder, Hongjun hurriedly raised a barrier, expanding it outward to push the screaming flower yao away—but there were simply too many of them, relentlessly throwing themselves at him and Li Jinglong.

“Cut the roots!” Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun’s knife carved through the stems of a clump of peonies, and a few of the girls vanished in a chorus of bloodcurdling screams. Hongjun flung all four of his knives toward the plants, slicing through them like cabbages. Agonized cries echoed through the garden as more and more yao suffered the same fate.

Standing amid the flowers, sword in hand, Li Jinglong suddenly noticed that one of the girls was frozen in place, desperately shaking her head at them without a sound.

Li Jinglong stilled Hongjun’s hand at once. Recalling his knives, Hongjun looked at Li Jinglong in confusion. Li Jinglong grabbed his hand. “Follow me!”

Wide slashes of his sword opened a path through the flower yao. He sprinted after the girl, who hurried out of the garden, making for the wooden hut the monkey yao had emerged from. Li Jinglong called for Li Bai, still engaged in battle with the monkeys behind the hut. “Taibai-xiong!”

Li Bai dashed over with his saber raised only to find Hongjun and Li Jinglong chasing a naked girl, with several dozen women in a similar state of undress hot on their heels. Shocked, he exclaimed, “What’s this?!”

The gaggle of flower yao ran to Li Bai instead, emitting fragrant fumes that instantly lulled him into a trance.

“Crap!” Hongjun cried. “Taibai-xiong likes girls!”

Li Jinglong motioned for Hongjun to keep following their quarry. Then he turned, took a pinch of oblivion pollen from a pouch at his waist, and scattered it into the air. Li Bai sneezed and instantly came to his senses,

rendering the flower yao's enchantments useless. Taking no chances, Li Jinglong slung an arm over his shoulders and dragged him away.

Belatedly noticing there was something strange about this yao, Hongjun called out to the slender girl in front of him, "Wait! Where are you going?"

After leaving the garden, the girl had clothed herself in a buttercup-yellow brocade robe embroidered with blooming pink flowers. She glanced back at Hongjun before slipping into the wooden hut.

The trio bolted in after her. Li Jinglong shut the door hard and latched it behind him, locking the crowd of flower yao outside. Kneeling, the woman opened a hidden door in the floor to reveal a flight of stairs, which she rapidly descended.

"Come quick!" the girl said. "There's no time!"

"Follow her," Li Jinglong said. "She's on our side."

As the three men filed in behind her, Hongjun asked in surprise, "You can talk?"

"I'm Xiangyu," the girl said softly. "I didn't dare say too much out there where the monkey yao could hear me."

Hongjun suddenly remembered what Wen Bin had said about Xiangyu, whom they'd gone to the House of Peerless Beauty to find.

"Thank you for saving Wen Bin," she said, lifting the hems of her yellow skirts as she hurried down the stairs.

Li Jinglong understood the situation at once. "It was you who dealt with the yao Wan Jue sent to spy on us."

Surprised, Xiangyu turned to study him. “Your reputation is well deserved, my lord—both intelligent and perceptive.”

True fire burst to life in Hongjun’s palm, illuminating the staircase spiraling down into the ground. They had been descending rapidly for some time, yet he could see no end to the darkness.

“Wan Jue will be here soon,” Xiangyu said. “We must be quick.”

“Where are they keeping the divine kun?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I’m not certain. Perhaps once we get there, you can figure out a way in and see for yourself. Wen Bin… Is he all right?”

Even in the dark, Hongjun could sense the emotions roiling under her question. “Do you love him?”

Xiangyu didn’t answer, leading them down the staircase in silence.

“How did they seize the divine kun?” Li Jinglong asked. “Is there someone guarding wherever he’s imprisoned?”

“I don’t know that either,” Xiangyu said. “My sisters and I used to live on Mount Baima, but the gu apes stole us away along with the monkeys that resided there. They augmented our cultivation with demonic energy. I was the only one who had attained human form before that, so I was safe from their manipulations.”

She pulled to a halt and looked up at Li Jinglong. “Promise me—give him a dose of oblivion pollen. I noticed you have some with you.”

Li Jinglong gestured for her to continue down the stairs. They could now see the foot of the spiral staircase below them, where something was emitting a faint red glow. Hongjun was instantly reminded of the sigils he’d seen in that cave outside Chang’an’s city walls. Sure enough, a yao

transportation array had been drawn on the floor of the cavern, deep underground.

Li Jinglong stopped at the bottom and turned to Xiangyu. “Is there anything else we can do for you, aside from that?”

Xiangyu bit down on her lip in thought. “If you kill the gu apes, please save my sisters. Dispel the demonic energy in them and plant them somewhere suitable, if you can.”

“What about you?” Hongjun asked.

“Wan Jue will be here soon,” Xiangyu answered. “I’ll buy you what time I can.”

“Wait!” Hongjun seemed to want to convince her, but before he could get any further, Li Jinglong interjected.

“We need to go. Let’s try passing through this array.”

“Without resonating spiritual devices, we can’t form a connection between here and wherever this goes,” Hongjun said.

“If it’s like the other one, this gate opens in only one direction, so we can enter but not exit,” Li Jinglong said. “Leave one of your knives outside.”

Hongjun stabbed a knife into the cave wall. Li Jinglong directed Hongjun and Li Bai to stand within the bounds of the array while he bent and pressed a hand to the center. Activating the heart lamp, he infused the array with spiritual power.

Just as it had when Hongjun passed through Wu Qiyu’s barrier using a cursed drop of blood, the array glowed brightly. But unlike the instantaneous displacement of that array, this time, the ground collapsed as space warped around them, sucking them in.

With a deep hum and a blinding flash, they found themselves bathed in blue light. They seemed to be still underground, but their surroundings were bizarre: Above them, the cave walls crawled with thousands of glowing blue veins, thrumming with energy that surged in all directions.

Li Jinglong looked around, raising his sword.

“Careful!” Hongjun warned. “This is where all the earthly meridians intersect!”

Earthly meridians, as vast as flowing rivers, crisscrossed the darkest depths of this natural cave. In the center, where the glowing blue veins converged, was a colossal crater filled to the brim with a liquid that smelled unmistakably of wine. A massive kun—over fifty feet in length and twenty feet wide—seemed to be soaking in it.

“The divine kun!” Li Jinglong and Hongjun rushed over.

“What a fine wine!” Li Bai exclaimed. “How much time would it take me to drain such a massive pool?”

“They’re… They’re soaking the divine kun to make medicinal wine?” Hongjun shouted toward the pool: “Your Majesty!”

The great kun, sunk so low only his back was above the surface, did not answer.

All three of them were at a loss for what to do. Li Bai rolled up his sleeves. “I’ll just drink it all!”

“Quit that,” Li Jinglong said. He spun his sword in his grip as he slowly made his way toward the great kun in the pool.

A knife flew from Hongjun’s fingers, plunging into the pool of wine and sinking into the great kun’s flesh, but the colossal fish did not react. The

knife crackled, releasing bolt after bolt of lightning that sent tremors coursing through Yuan Kun’s body. Still the divine kun remained unaware, deep in slumber.

Li Jinglong was a few feet from the edge of the pool when a cloud of black smoke exploded above his head. Countless venomous insects swarmed toward him.

“Stop them!” he shouted.

Hongjun released his pentacolor sacred light, but it was too late. The swarm dove into the pool. The surface churned, then erupted with a deafening *boom* to reveal the figure of a burly man rising from the wine.

“I told him you wouldn’t agree to that deal,” the man said, his mouth curving into a wicked smile. “He insisted I wait for you. However—now that you’re here, none of you will ever leave.”

Li Jinglong raised the Sword of Wisdom, filling it with the power of the heart lamp until it shone brilliantly in his hand. “Who are you?”

“Qu Nie,” the man said. “It must have been difficult, chasing us all the way to Luoyang.” He studied Li Jinglong with a faint smile, then turned slowly toward Hongjun. “You aren’t of much use to us, Li Jinglong—capturing Kong Hongjun, on the other hand, would be considered a great achievement.”

“Hey, what about me?” Li Bai piped up. “Aren’t I worth anything?”

It took only a glance for Qu Nie to see that Li Bai was an ordinary mortal who posed no threat. Sneering, he waved his hand, and a stream of wine surged out of the pool.

“Look out!” Hongjun cried as the wine knocked Li Bai to the ground.

Li Bai waved off Hongjun's concern. The enemy wanted the two of them, not Li Bai. If they rushed to protect him, Qu Nie would simply aim for him instead. It would only make things more difficult if Li Bai were captured and they had to worry about his safety.

"Where's that brother of yours? We'll deal with both of you at once," Li Jinglong said, a hint of steel in his voice.

Hovering above the pool, Qu Nie replied, "Li Jinglong, you rely too much on your petty tricks. Believe me, if we wished to, any one of the four cardinal vices could easily defeat you."

"Then what are you waiting for?!" Li Jinglong roared as he charged toward Qu Nie, Hongjun right on his heels.

Qu Nie sneered. He raised his palms, and the wine swelled into a towering wave that roared toward Hongjun and Li Jinglong.

"Give me a boost!" Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun threw up a barrier with his sacred light to block the wine and skidded over to Li Jinglong, who vaulted off his back in a flying leap. His body twisted in midair as he pounced toward Qu Nie, an arrow fisted in one hand. Qu Nie reeled back, but Li Jinglong's move was only a feint—with a flick of his free hand, an arrow glowing with the power of the heart lamp hurtled toward Qu Nie from behind.

With an enraged roar, Qu Nie disintegrated into a swarm of venomous insects. They had already discussed how to defeat these gu apes: Just as planned, Hongjun expanded his sacred light and wrapped it around the insects buzzing through the air.

Before Hongjun could trap them, the insects dispersed and reformed several lengths away as the human Qu Nie. The pool of wine roiled and reared, its contents thundering toward them in a colossal wave. Landing in a crouch on the divine kun's back, Li Jinglong broke into a run and leapt to shore while Hongjun threw up a wall of sacred light to block the wave. The wine crashed and disintegrated against the bright barrier.

"Wait for an opening," Li Jinglong said, watching the swarm. "I'll force the insects into a corner, then you'll strike. We won't let them escape."

Hongjun hummed in acknowledgment. Thousands of glistening arrows made of wine materialized above the pool and shot toward them. Hongjun raised his barrier again, but these arrows pivoted in midair. They swerved around his barrier and splashed down from all sides, drenching them in wine.

This wine was stronger than what Hongjun usually drank, and it poured down relentlessly until the space around them was filled with it, the liquid hemming them in from every direction. Even the pentacolor sacred light couldn't beat it back. Hongjun wrapped himself and Li Jinglong in light as wine rose around them, until they were imprisoned in a shrinking bubble of air within his barrier.

Seeing that they were about to suffer the same fate as last time—when they'd almost drowned in the fox yao's sea of blood—Li Jinglong ordered, "Retreat! Let's get out of here!"

Hongjun retracted his sacred light, and Li Jinglong dragged Hongjun behind him as he dashed out of the surging column of wine. The ground and walls were drenched in it as the swarm of venomous insects twisted through the air and reconverged into the form of a black ape. The ape lumbered toward them, the ground shaking with the weight of its steps.

Alcohol permeated the air in the form of a mist that Hongjun gradually breathed in, making his head spin. Li Jinglong pushed Hongjun out of the way of one of the gu ape's strikes, yet in the next instant, another jet of wine came surging toward him. Li Jinglong choked under the onslaught, swallowing several huge mouthfuls as he struggled for breath.

Hongjun rose shakily. The gu ape was a blurred silhouette in his wavering vision, and Li Jinglong's voice, calling his name, seemed far away. Hongjun gripped his knives between his fingers and charged. The ape effortlessly dodged his attack.

"Hongjun!" Li Jinglong was beginning to feel the effects of the wine, but Hongjun was a lightweight to start with—he was already stumbling over himself. Without Hongjun's barrier of sacred light, Li Jinglong was powerless against the torrent of wine blasting him again and again.

"You…" Li Jinglong said weakly.

The gu ape cackled hysterically. "Li Jinglong! You useless, miserable __"

Another spout of wine propelled Li Jinglong into the air and sent him crashing into the far wall of the cave, coughing out the wine that had flooded his nose and mouth. As the gu ape prowled toward him, he lurched upright to face his enemy.

At the same time, someone else had gotten to his feet behind the ape.

"Ow…" Li Bai shook his head. "That hurt."

The gu ape whirled to face Li Bai, who sniffed the air. "Oh, now *that's* a strong wine."

“Ha!” The gu ape set its knuckles to the ground and charged Li Bai, who drew his saber in a flash, stumbling aside to dodge the attack. He parried the next swipe of the ape’s hands before lurching into a counterstrike, slicing toward the enemy with his blade.

Li Jinglong watched, speechless.

The gu ape, not expecting a mere mortal to react so swiftly, threw a series of punches, which Li Bai somehow dodged nimbly while tripping over his own feet. The ape lumbered after him, attacking again and again, yet it didn’t manage to touch so much as a single hair on its adversary’s head, while Li Bai landed several solid strikes.

“Impertinence!” Enraged, the gu ape pointed, and a wave of wine roared toward Li Bai, sweeping him to the far end of the cave.

But after gulping a few mouthfuls, Li Bai was even more fired up. He skidded across the ground toward the gu ape, bellowing, “A fine wine!”

Momentarily bewildered, the gu ape raised his arms in a two-handed smash, ready to crush Li Bai’s head into paste. Li Bai dropped and slid between the creature’s legs, slashing his saber upward to carve straight through the gu ape’s buttocks and up its spine. Buzzing insects poured from the gaping wound as the ape roared in pain. Mad with fury, the gu ape swung its long arms wildly as it lunged in pursuit of Li Bai.

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Chapter 107:
An Explosion of Poison

THE WORLD WAS SPINNING so badly Hongjun felt like throwing up. He shook his head violently. A drenched Li Jinglong called his name: “Hongjun! Hongjun!”

Hongjun watched as the gu ape chased Li Bai, feeling his head about to split. The ape drew almost all the wine from the pool and sent it crashing toward the poet, who darted around, scaling the cave walls as if he possessed divine powers.

As the chase went on, the pool was gradually drained. The divine kun lay in the center, Hongjun’s knife, crackling with lightning, still embedded in his flesh. Wine streamed from his slack mouth. His eyes opened a sliver and blinked slowly once before snapping awake.

The great kun’s voice echoed through Hongjun and Li Jinglong’s minds: *Li Jinglong, raise your sword. Stab it into the energy flowing through the earthly meridians.*

Li Jinglong staggered to his feet. Hongjun, still dizzy, asked, “Who’s that?”

Hongjun, crawl backward until you reach the wall. Raise the pentacolor sacred light up around you.

Still muddled from the wine, Hongjun unthinkingly did as he was told. He turned around and crawled until his head collided with the cool stone of the cave, where he woozily expanded his sacred light.

When I say ‘Go,’ Li Jinglong, stab your sword into the walls, the divine kun instructed quietly, lightning flashing in his eyes. *When I say ‘Gather,’ Hongjun, slap it.*

“Slap who?” Hongjun slurred.

Li Bai, turn around! the divine kun roared. *Swing your sword!*

Li Bai was running like mad, the gu ape in hot pursuit behind him, when the kun’s voice thundered into his mind. He jerked to a stop in confusion—he had no idea who was speaking to him. Turning instinctively to look for the source, he yelled back, “This is a saber!”

The gu ape whipped its head toward the pool as it realized the kun was conscious, fear palpable in its gaze. It wavered just a fraction before abandoning Li Bai and redirecting all the wine back into the pool. At that moment, Li Bai’s saber came singing down from behind, the gleam of his blade tracing a perfect arc in the air as the gu ape was halved. With a pained cry, it disintegrated into a swarm of insects that scattered in all directions.

The divine kun roared again, *Go!*

Li Jinglong plunged the Sword of Wisdom into the cave wall. The energy within the earthly meridians flooded into the blade as Li Jinglong gripped it tight, his body flaring bright. The heart lamp barely managed to shield his heart meridian as the blinding blue glow swallowed him whole, until he appeared to be composed entirely of light.

Attack! the divine kun bellowed in his mind. The great fish opened his eyes wide, and lightning forked from his eyes, meeting the veins of energy flowing over the cave walls around them.

Li Jinglong screamed in pain as streams of pure blue flames erupted from his palms and shot toward the buzzing cloud of insects. The insects dodged the flames and dove at the divine kun. The crackling lightning fanned out along the earthly meridians, forming a spider's web that bombarded the insects scattering in all directions.

Trapped, the insects flocked toward the far end of the cave. The divine kun called, *Hongjun, gather!*

Hongjun, head drooping from the wine, jolted awake at the sound of his name. His hand glowed with the sacred light; he flung it over the insects swarming toward him, and suddenly, it felt as if he'd pinned something small to the ground.

Hold it down! Now, incinerate them! the divine kun ordered.

Li Jinglong pressed a hand to the ground, sending a stream of blue flame licking toward Hongjun, who still had one of the insects trapped under his palm. Countless insects buzzed around the imprisoned one in a frenzy as Li Jinglong's cyclone of earthly-meridian fire engulfed them in dazzling light, burning them until nothing remained.

With a muffled rumble, the ground began to buck beneath their feet. The divine kun let the lightning fade. Li Jinglong wrenched the Sword of Wisdom from the cave wall; he was on the verge of collapsing from pain, but he forced himself to trudge toward Hongjun.

Hongjun had slumped face down on the ground, having passed out from drunkenness. Even in sleep, his hand—still glowing with the pentacolor sacred light—remained firmly planted on the ground, trapping something beneath it.

It's incapacitated now, said the divine kun slowly. *When the queen alone remains alive, it can't do much—not without the powers of its offspring. Seal it with an incantation.*

A pitch-black beetle scuttled out from the gaps between Hongjun's fingers. Li Jinglong fished out a wooden box Qiu Yongsi had given him, caught the creature inside, and shut the lid firmly before tucking it away.

"Hongjun, wake up." Li Jinglong scooped Hongjun into his arms.

Hongjun stirred slightly. Li Jinglong turned to face the divine kun. The cave was rumbling more violently now, the walls beginning to crumble.

"We have to go," Li Jinglong said. "Hongjun!" he called, shaking him awake. "The teleportation sigil!"

Climb onto my back, the divine kun commanded. *I still have use for his throwing knife.*

Li Jinglong looked at the divine kun. "You…"

We'll talk once we're out of here, the divine kun said, cutting him off. *Quickly now!*

Li Bai was the first to climb up onto the divine kun's back. "So you're the 'fish of the North Sea'[12] from the ancient texts… Whoa!"

The instant Li Jinglong had clambered up with Hongjun in his arms, the divine kun surged upward and crashed through the ceiling of the cave. The three of them screamed as Yuan Kun soared out of the subterranean cavern and passed through an underground river, where a roaring cascade of cold water rushed over them, sobering them up instantly.

Hongjun jolted awake. "What's going on?" The last thing he remembered was entering some strange glowing cave with Li Jinglong.

The divine kun began to shrink in size as he smashed his way out of the depths of the earth. They arrived at the transportation array at the foot of the underground staircase as the divine kun regained his human form.

There was an enraged roar as a tempest blasted in, sweeping all four of them toward opposite corners of the cave.

“I didn’t expect you to outmaneuver us,” Wan Jue said coldly. “A miscalculation on my part.”

Yuan Kun sneered. “You were born of emotions and desires, and they will also be your downfall.”

Wan Jue narrowed his eyes dangerously. “We’ll see about that, shall we?”

With difficulty, Hongjun levered himself upright and looked at Wan Jue. The handsome man sat on a massive boulder within the cavern, a gold bracelet around his wrist exuding a stream of black mist.

“Foul creature!” Yuan Kun said, his voice deepening to a guttural growl as the dense fog from Wan Jue’s bracelet wound around them.

Gasping violently, Hongjun spotted Li Jinglong amid the mist and felt a feverish heat suffuse his body.

“Hongjun, recall your knives!” came Li Jinglong’s voice from beside him.

Hongjun’s eyes snapped open. Li Jinglong was standing right in front of him. With a flick of his fingers, the last knife wedged in the wall on the other side of the cave came loose and speared toward them—without a sound, it plunged into the back of the false Li Jinglong’s neck, revealing Wan Jue in disguise.

In a blink, Wan Jue shifted into a pure white gu ape. The ape disintegrated with a chilling howl, becoming an endless swarm of insects that darted away from Hongjun, swirling toward the far side of the cave. The black mist winding around them subsided, revealing Xiangyu standing in front of Li Bai, trembling as she turned toward the mist.

At that same moment, a vision of a naked Hongjun dissipated in front of Li Jinglong. This time, he needed no prompting from the divine kun: He dashed forward, slashing the Sword of Wisdom straight into the swarm of insects. The powers of the heart lamp licked down the blade as white flames, incinerating the insects.

“Capture the queen—that blue one there!” Yuan Kun ordered. He blasted the insects with lightning from his palms while Hongjun merged his knives into a long saber and slashed.

Light flashed, and the queen shattered like a brittle piece of amber. Instantly the teeming swarm of insects exploded into a mist that dissipated into the air.

Gasping for breath, Hongjun inadvertently caught a whiff of the sweet fragrance of this poisonous mist. Uncontrollable tremors began coursing through his body.

Watching Hongjun shiver, Yuan Kun remarked coldly, “You shouldn’t have killed it. This will only waste more time. But what’s done is done.”

Xiangyu rushed forward and dropped to one knee before the divine kun, imploring, “Please, Your Majesty, save my sisters’ lives!”

Yuan Kun scoffed. “Whoever ties the bell to the tiger must be the one to untie it.”

The sun was setting by the time Li Jinglong stumbled into the Department of Exorcism headquarters in Luoyang, panting as he supported Hongjun with an arm around his waist.

“Sirs!” Wen Bin jumped to his feet to help them, only for Li Jinglong to brusquely shove him aside.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“None of your business,” Li Jinglong snapped. “Get out of theway.”

“I can’t—” Hongjun moaned, clawing at any part of Li Jinglong he could reach.

As Wen Bin peered around outside, he saw a blindfolded man enter the courtyard and exclaimed in surprise, “It’s you!”

Yuan Kun hummed in response as he strode into the main hall and sat down without so much as a by-your-leave. Befuddled, Wen Bin asked, “Who *are* you?”

“Silence,” Yuan Kun snapped. “Who I am is none of your business.”

Wen Bin was at a loss for words.

More visitors entered the courtyard—this time a group of laborers pushing two handcarts through the gate.

A woman’s voice called cautiously, “Wen Bin?”

“Xiangyu!” Wen Bin cried out in surprise.

Xiangyu had the men unload the peonies—pots and all—from the carts and set them down in the courtyard. Wen Bin asked, “Where did all these flowers come from?”

Xiangyu shot Yuan Kun a tentative glance before replying. “Look after them for me. Some had their roots cut, so take good care of them and make sure they don’t die.”

“Sure thing,” Wen Bin said with a smile. “I’m a master gardener, after all.”

Approaching Yuan Kun, Xiangyu began, “Your Majesty—”

“Don’t worry about Li Bai,” Yuan Kun said. “Let him stay in the Galaxy for now.”

“Then…the other two…”

“You can’t help them,” said Yuan Kun. “The poison Wan Jue emitted before his death will take at least three days and nights to wear off. They’ll recover naturally after that.”

Xiangyu nodded. “I’ll go make dinner then.”

Yuan Kun sat quietly in the main hall while Wen Bin arranged and counted the pots—one hundred and eight in total. Satisfied, he wandered into the rear courtyard to help Xiangyu in the kitchen. When he asked her what had transpired, she merely spoke a few teasing words, which made him so shy he didn’t ask any more questions.

As night fell, Xiangyu lit the oil lamps and set the table for dinner. “The other two…”

“Don’t mind them,” Yuan Kun replied. “Just prepare some congee and deliver it to them tomorrow morning.”

Xiangyu’s expression turned strange as Wen Bin asked curiously, “Are the two of them…?”

“Just eat your dinner,” Xiangyu huffed. “You ask too many questions.”

And with that, Wen Bin had his answer.

Fast asleep in the middle of the night, Hongjun dreamed. An abundant stream of images flashed past, each dissipating in the blink of an eye: his mother singing softly while cradling him in her arms, his father holding his tiny hands and supporting him as he toddled on unsteady feet. A young Li Jinglong's arm around his shoulder as they searched under a parasol tree for a cicada that had shed its shell…

"I'm really envious. You've been to so many places," Li Jinglong was saying.

"Every time we move, my parents forbid me from going out," Hongjun replied. "No matter where I go, the only thing I see is walls."

"When I grow up, I'll take you on an adventure. We'll go to all the places we've never been and eat all the delicious food we've never eaten," Li Jinglong said.

"Where should we go first?" Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong grew solemn, urging Hongjun to pick. Although Hongjun had lived all over, he'd never truly experienced the prosperity and liveliness of the mortal world. After lengthy consideration, he said, "I think Chang'an is pretty nice already."

"We should go to Luoyang!" Li Jinglong suggested. "Everyone says Luoyang is the divine capital, with a palace in the heavens and a galaxy of stars that goes on for miles…"

"Luoyang, then!"

Dream and reality overlapped. He'd never expected that when Li Jinglong finally fulfilled his promise, the galaxy they visited would be entirely different from what he'd imagined as a child.

Hongjun was beyond exhausted. Most of Wan Jue's poison was out of his system by now, but he still fidgeted restlessly in his sleep, waking Li Jinglong. Each time this happened, they'd talk quietly and make love once again until they dropped back off, and the cycle would continue.

The next morning, Li Jinglong left the room wearing nothing but a thin robe, leaving a swath of his chest bare. When he saw a breakfast tray left for them outside the room, he carried it inside and ate with Hongjun. The door to their room remained shut for the rest of the day.

That night, Li Jinglong carried Hongjun out to the rear courtyard so they could bathe before helping him back to their room with an arm around his waist.

When dawn broke the next day, Hongjun sat up in bed, the flush almost gone from his face. "I can't do this anymore! If this goes on, I'll die before the poison is out of my system!"

"Oh, come now," Li Jinglong said with a smile. "Was it really so tiring?"

"Yes!" Hongjun felt like they'd barely stopped for a moment—his body had been left a sticky mess on several occasions these past few days.

As Li Jinglong helped Hongjun wash, he heard Wen Bin and Xiangyu talking outside. Li Bai had returned, it seemed. Li Jinglong dropped a kiss on Hongjun's ear and helped him into his robes, then took his hand and led him out of the room.

Xiangyu, laying breakfast on the table in the main hall, looked up with a smile. Li Jinglong swallowed and returned her smile awkwardly. Li Bai looked pale as well as he sat down and nodded at the company. He tucked into his breakfast without even asking for wine.

Hongjun was so ravenous he was about to keel over. Yuan Kun glanced at him. “Qing Xiong said you were too impulsive, and he was right. If you hadn’t killed the gu ape, we wouldn’t have lost these days.”

“Perhaps it’s a good thing,” Li Jinglong replied. “Life is uncertain; there’s no way of knowing if this turn of events will help or harm us.”

Yuan Kun hummed absently. After a moment, he conceded, “Now that I think about it, you may be right.”

This confused Hongjun once again. He was bursting with questions, but before he could ask even the first of them, Li Jinglong stopped him with a look—*eat first; we’ll talk later*.

Xiangyu ladled a bowlful of congee for Hongjun and held it out to him deferentially, with both hands. “It’s all thanks to you, sir.”

Hongjun waved her gratitude aside. Even now, he didn’t quite understand how Xiangyu and Wen Bin had arrived at their present circumstances. His gaze darted between them curiously. “How long have you two known each other?”

Xiangyu turned to Wen Bin and produced a few coins. “Go fetch some fermented bean curd from the store.”

Wen Bin took the money with a smile and obediently went.

“I’ve known Wen Bin for four years,” Xiangyu said. “He was a gardener at Qili Pagoda.”

That's right, thought Hongjun. Xiangyu had mentioned she and her flower yao sisters had once lived on Mount Baima, where peonies thrived.

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Chapter 108:
Destined by the Heavens

PEONIES HAD BEEN a favorite among the citizens of Luoyang since Empress Wu Zhao's reign. Gardeners often hiked Mount Baima in search of exquisite specimens to transplant into their peony gardens. The first time Xiangyu met Wen Bin was in these mountains; he'd gone there in the spring in search of such rare varietals, and…

"Did he fall off a cliff?" Li Jinglong asked.

"No," Xiangyu replied. "He was drunk off the wine he brought with him, snoring on the ground."

One glance from afar at the young and handsome gardener lying inebriated and unkempt amid the sea of flowers was enough for Xiangyu to fall in love. She observed him for a long time as he came and went, watching as he searched high and low for the most beautiful flower in the mountains, which he'd then replant in Luoyang.

"So you appeared in human form and got to know him," Li Jinglong hazarded.

"I didn't," Xiangyu said. "I was curious about him, so I appeared before him as a flower and let him take me back to the city."

Hongjun blinked.

Wen Bin potted Xiangyu's true form in his room and watered the peony every day. An amused Xiangyu would assume her human form at night

and tidy his house for him. Wen Bin remained oblivious to his nightly guest, and so human and flower lived together this way for the better half of a year.

“And then you were seized by the gu apes?” Li Jinglong asked.

“No,” Xiangyu answered.

“You guessed wrong three times in a row!” Hongjun quipped. “That never happens!”

Li Jinglong put a hand to his brow and waved in surrender.

When spring came again, Xiangyu bloomed gloriously for him. Wen Bin, too, had gradually fallen in love with her—with a peony. He’d sit alone under the moon, looking at his peony as he talked to himself and let his mind wander.

At this point, Xiangyu’s expression took on a tinge of sorrow. “But yao have powers and humans do not; they must eventually go their separate ways. If we became lovers, the poison in me would gradually weaken him, and he’d die a tragic death. This is heaven’s design—humans and yao can never be together. The night after I bloomed, I thought I might as well let it be my goodbye. I headed back to Mount Baima.”

But when Xiangyu returned to the mountains, she discovered they were now occupied by a troupe of monkey yao, led by the gu ape Wan Jue.

Wan Jue bore the strong energy of a heavenly demon. Using his powers of lust, he accelerated the cultivation of all the peonies in the valley until they gained human forms—a feat that would normally require a century of cultivation spent absorbing the essences of the sun and moon.

In a bid to save her sisters, Xiangyu confronted Wan Jue. But she was no match for the gu ape, who defeated her and brought her to Luoyang with

the rest. Wan Jue sent a band of monkey yao to guard the garden on Mount Longmen and hired gardeners to care for the peonies—including Wen Bin, who was surprised and overjoyed to be reunited with the white peony he'd once lost.

Over the next few years, Xiangyu waited patiently for a chance that never came. Wan Jue, who had been powerful to begin with, became even more so with the aid of the heavenly demon. To grow his base of operations, he had the peonies take the form of prostitutes in the House of Peerless Beauty, a brothel he opened in the Galaxy.

One night, consumed by her yearning to see Wen Bin, Xiangyu snuck into the city to meet him in her human form. Upon speaking to her, Wen Bin at last realized that she and the peony he treasured were one and the same. Just as he was about to pour out his heart to her, Wan Jue took notice of her absence and summoned her back to the brothel.

Wen Bin tracked her to the Galaxy, where Xiangyu—bound by Wan Jue's powers—was forced to inject him with yao poison. When Wen Bin left, Xiangyu managed to follow him, but she couldn't treat him no matter what she tried. Wen Bin was plagued by the poison until Hongjun stumbled across him and brought him back to the Department of Exorcism.

"I had a feeling we were being watched," Li Jinglong remarked. "I thought someone among the enemy's ranks might be helping us. That's why Wan Jue was surprised by our appearance at the garden."

Xiangyu nodded. "You were correct."

"This time," Hongjun said.

"Maybe he was just lucky?" Li Bai added.

Xiangyu laughed, but Li Jinglong—temporarily embarrassed—remained silent. She explained, “Wan Jue sent some monkey yao to spy on you, but I dealt with them.”

“Now that you’ve repaid them for their good deed, what do you intend to do?” the divine kun asked solemnly.

Xiangyu bit her lip. “I want… I want to be with him, even if we can’t… I still want to be with him.”

As Hongjun looked at her in confusion, Li Jinglong said, “You’re willing to go without it, but perhaps he isn’t.”

“I know.” Xiangyu blushed prettily. “Men always understand other men best.”

Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun, who had no idea what was going on. It was Li Bai who came to his rescue: “One of them is yao, and the other is human. They can’t be intimate unless you teach them how to deal with the poison.”

“Oh!” Hongjun exclaimed in realization.

Xiangyu was flushing crimson now. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “You have my gratitude, sir.”

“Then I’ll give you a prescription for the antidote—”

“Wait,” Yuan Kun interjected. “All beings in the mortal world have a destiny, flower yao. Would you feel no regret, even if you were to die the next day, for the sake of a brief taste of ecstasy?”

It isn’t that serious, is it? Hongjun thought, looking from Yuan Kun to Xiangyu.

Xiangyu seemed to have already thought it through. “Even if I could only be with him for one day, I’d be happy.”

“Cause and effect intertwine in an endless cycle,” Yuan Kun pronounced. “Your love is written in your fate, since it could not have been had you not met Mahamayuri and Acalanatha. But this is both a fated encounter and an inescapable trial. It is your choice to make, but you must be certain you won’t regret it.”

“What will happen if she regrets her choice?” Hongjun asked.

Yuan Kun didn’t answer. Li Jinglong shook his head slowly. When it came to fate and destiny in the mortal world, some words ought not be spoken.

“I’ve made up my mind,” Xiangyu said.

“Give her the prescription,” Yuan Kun instructed Hongjun.

Hongjun wrote her a copy, and she knelt to him in the main hall. Yet when he stepped forward to help her up, Yuan Kun said, “You should kowtow to her too. Go on.”

Hongjun was confused, but he did as Yuan Kun said nonetheless. Yuan Kun was close friends with Qing Xiong, which made him practically Hongjun’s uncle—not to mention the fact that he was a yao king in his own right. Hongjun knelt opposite Xiangyu, and they kowtowed to each other thrice.

Li Jinglong felt a vague sense of unease—this looked far too much like a wedding ceremony—but Xiangyu didn’t question Yuan Kun. She merely smiled and said, “If our fates are destined to intertwine, so be it. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Yuan Kun nodded.

“Where will you go?” Li Jinglong asked.

“We want to settle down here in Luoyang,” Xiangyu said. “Earthly energies are abundant here, and my sisters are weak after what they suffered under the control of the gu apes. I was hoping we could stay here a few days until we’ve recuperated.”

“The two of you are welcome here in the department headquarters. No one else will be here, anyway,” Li Jinglong said. “You can keep watch over this place for me in the meantime. If anything changes, I’ll send a message from Chang’an.”

Overjoyed, Xiangyu knelt again in gratitude, which Li Jinglong accepted calmly. This time, Yuan Kun did not tell him to reciprocate.

Hongjun looked at Li Jinglong with a smile. He thought back to what Yuan Kun had said. Xiangyu must have unintentionally saved his life—or would do so in the future—which was why he had commanded them to kowtow to each other just now.

“Now that you’re done here, it’s time for you to return to Chang’an,” Yuan Kun said.

Sensing that Yuan Kun had more to say to them, Li Jinglong immediately packed his things. He instructed Hongjun and Li Bai to follow suit, and the three of them departed for Chang’an before the sun had set.

Once outside the gates of Luoyang, Yuan Kun dove into the Luo River and transformed into a massive fish. The three of them rode on its back as it cut through the wind and water, making for the Yellow River.

This was Hongjun's first time riding on a yao king's back while sober, and he couldn't help but exclaim in wonder. Li Bai said jovially, "I traversed famous mountains and majestic rivers all my life in search of immortals, only to experience such a wonder right here in the Central Plains—how marvelous!"

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Yuan Kun said coolly. "You're getting oblivion pollen when you arrive."

As Li Bai looked at the kun in confusion, Hongjun's mouth twitched. He glanced at Li Jinglong, who motioned for Hongjun to leave it to him.

The moon rose over the mountains in the east, bathing the Luo River in its silver glow. It was full dark when the divine kun neared the Yellow River. Seeing how deserted the area was, without any trace of human habitation, he leapt high into the night sky and soared into the sea of clouds.

"Wow!" Hongjun exclaimed.

Li Bai sat on the divine kun's tail, drinking wine by himself. Li Jinglong, preoccupied with his own thoughts, sat beside Hongjun on the kun's head as the wind gusted past them. Finally, curiosity got the better of him. "Are you heading back to Chang'an with us?"

No. Yuan Kun's voice spoke again in their minds. *With my injuries, I'm not Xie Yu's match.*

Shocked, Hongjun asked, "What do you mean, you're not his match?"

The way he saw it, Chong Ming was the most powerful yao there was, and although Qing Xiong was slightly less powerful, he wasn't too shabby either. The divine kun was surely at least on par with Qing Xiong. Why were all three of these great yao so wary of Yang Guozhong?

Atop the kun's head, the glowing silhouette of a young man materialized—it was Yuan Kun, or rather, part of the kun's soul that resembled his human form. Back to Li Jinglong and Hongjun, he looked out over the boundless sea of clouds.

"Xie Yu possesses a priceless treasure," Yuan Kun replied. "It has the power to turn back time and manipulate the endless cycle of cause and effect—what we call the karmic cycle. This spiritual device can disrupt the futures I have foreseen, which is why I cannot guess when he will appear. Nor can I predict any cause or effect within the karmic cycles he has tampered with."

Eagerly, Li Jinglong said, "This is exactly why I wanted to ask you—"

"I know what you want to ask," Yuan Kun said. "When I passed the heart lamp to Qing Xiong, I foresaw that you'd fight Hongjun under a torrential rain."

Hongjun was shocked. Even Li Jinglong couldn't find the right words for a moment. So Yuan Kun had predicted the heart lamp would come to Li Jinglong from the beginning.

"Everything that's happened…" Hongjun said, a tremble coming into his voice. "Was it all part of your plan?"

A furrow had appeared between Li Jinglong's brows. The revelation that his fate was in someone else's hands made him feel as if he'd been made the butt of a cruel joke.

"Cause and effect give rise to each other in an endless cycle," Yuan Kun explained. "Two thousand years ago, after I met Zhuangzi,[13] I gained the ability to see these threads of causality. There is a saying among humans: All turns of fortune are predestined by the heavens. Their workings must not be

divulged lest calamity follow. Yet when facing one fork in the road after another, it's clear that even destiny and fate are calculable outcomes."

At last he turned toward them. "Do you know how to read the Flying Star Chart?"

"Somewhat," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun, too, had heard of this diagram. Fortune tellers in the Han dynasty had once made calculations based on the Flying Star Chart to predict the change of seasons and foretell fates—but these spiritual techniques had long been lost. Yuan Kun stepped forward and settled cross-legged before them. The piece of his soul they conversed with had manifested without his corporeal body, and the black blindfold he usually wore was gone, revealing the brilliant stars glittering in his dark eyes.

"First, one of the chart's nine squares is chosen as the starting point—the beginning of a karmic cycle. Calculations proceed following a path that passes through all nine squares; all outcomes intersect and give rise to new ones. In this way, all consequences of an action taken, no matter how great or small, can be predicted, one after another," Yuan Kun explained. "Hongjun acquiring the heart lamp is a cause, as is his journey down the mountain and battle with Fei'ao. Cause and effect intersect and evolve into new possibilities; as long as the calculations are made correctly, he is destined to encounter Li Jinglong in an alleyway in Chang'an."

Only with this did Li Jinglong's discomfort begin to subside. "Does the advice you offered Hongjun factor into this karmic cycle?"

"No, I don't factor into it," Yuan Kun answered calmly. "You, on the other hand, were long since fated to meet Hongjun. If we delve into your pasts, it's obvious your fate and Hongjun's have always been closely

intertwined. I merely added a bead to the chart and worked the abacus, and this ‘bead’ was the heart lamp.”

Listening, Hongjun felt he’d been enlightened—Yuan Kun had divulged a profoundly esoteric secret about the workings of the cosmos. He had no time to ponder this, however, as Li Jinglong asked, “When did our fates first intersect?”

“This tale begins during the era of gods four thousand years ago, when Mahamayuri and Acalanatha clashed in a battle that shook the earth,” Yuan Kun said. “I will allow you to ask me three more questions, Li Jinglong, so think carefully.”

“Why?” Li Jinglong asked in confusion.

“For each person, only three causal factors may be added to this.” Yuan Kun held out his palm, and a glowing cube materialized above it. Thousands of beads whirred within the nine-by-nine cube as it expanded until it seemed to swallow heaven and earth. As they watched, it appeared to absorb the energies flowing through the heavenly and earthly meridians, which bounced and collided against one another within its walls.

“That was your first question,” Yuan Kun said.

“That doesn’t count!” Hongjun yelped.

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“Of course it counts,” Yuan Kun said evenly. “Do you think this answer will be of no use to him?”

Li Jinglong took a deep breath. He’d been ready to retort as well, but he calmed down after hearing these words. Perhaps, through this explanation, Yuan Kun had revealed how destiny could be predicted, which might in turn give him an inkling of how to change a predestined future.

When he again met Yuan Kun’s starry gaze, it was approving, as if the kun had guessed the direction of his thoughts. “Clever as you are, you should remember what I said to you the first time we met.”

“A single choice,” Li Jinglong murmured. “All fates are born from a single choice…”

Yuan Kun inclined his head slightly. In an instant, Li Jinglong saw to the heart of the matter, which Yuan Kun had not said out loud. Every idea conceived in the split second between one choice and the next was a bead added to this vast cube that might reinforce or negate a predestined outcome. Their future—Hongjun’s, and his connection to Mara—was not set in stone.

“How are demons born?” Li Jinglong asked.

“Demons are humans, yao, and gods themselves,” Yuan Kun said. “They are darkness that has been discarded: emotions and desires, nightmares, birth, sickness, old age, death—all manner of uncontrollable suffering that must be relinquished before entering the cycle of reincarnation, and that lingers in the mortal world after death. He who aims to become a sage must rid himself of what they call the three corpses: the kindness, cruelty, and obsessions within their heart. Such things remain between heaven and earth. When all these elements come together, demonic energy is born.”

Hongjun began, “But the heavenly and earthly meridians can purify demonic energy, can’t—” He cut himself off, fearing this would be counted as another question. “Uh—yes, they can, I think.”

“For it to enter the purification cycle, you must first direct the demonic energy back into the meridians,” Yuan Kun answered. “Let me ask you: How would you gather all the demonic energy roaming the Divine Land?”

“The demon seed…” Li Jinglong said, a tremble in his voice.

Yuan Kun turned back to face the sea of clouds, speaking slowly. “Four thousand years ago, Mahamayuri and Acalanatha attempted to save all living things from the terror of demonic energy. Mahamayuri made himself the seed of Mara, with the power to gather all the demonic energy of the mortal world once a millennium. When Mara appears, Acalanatha, too, will be born into the world once again. He will destroy the fully formed Mara with his six artifacts, returning the demonic energies to the heavenly and earthly meridians. A thousand years after that, as demonic energies grow stronger and the Divine Land teems with malign energy, Mahamayuri will reincarnate once again—thus, the cycle continues without end.”

Li Jinglong suddenly remembered what Yuan Kun had said to Xiangyu in Luoyang: *Your love is written in your fate, since it could not have been had you not met Mahamayuri and Acalanatha. But this is both a fated encounter and an inescapable trial.*

“Next question,” Yuan Kun said.

Li Jinglong sank into thought. He looked at Hongjun, then at Yuan Kun.

“This is the last question you may ask,” Yuan Kun said, turning to face

him. “Why haven’t you asked about the future?”

“I don’t want to know about the future,” Li Jinglong replied.

As Yuan Kun studied him in silence, Li Jinglong said, “If I don’t know my future, I can still believe the events of my life are not predestined.”

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Chapter 109:
Taking His Place

"MY THIRD QUESTION is this," Li Jinglong said. "If I acquire the six artifacts of Acalanatha and use them to kill Mara, is that equivalent to destroying the demon seed?"

Yuan Kun remained silent for a long time, looking up at the thousands of beads rolling around in the sky-spanning cube. Li Jinglong hadn't asked about the future, so he wouldn't offer an answer about it. Yuan Kun—or rather, this luminescent manifestation of his soul—narrowed his eyes, watching the movements of the beads.

Hongjun held his breath. He knew this question would determine whether he lived or died. Li Jinglong had worded his question very cleverly: He hadn't asked about their future, nor if his future self would kill Hongjun or An Lushan.

"Perhaps," Yuan Kun answered.

"Perhaps?" Li Jinglong echoed.

"Perhaps." Yuan Kun nodded.

"So the remaining five artifacts are…"

"I don't know," Yuan Kun said. "I cannot see them. There's a dark cloud in the future, blocking my sight. The furthest I can see is a certain ending that may or may not come to pass. But believe me, it will arrive faster than you can imagine."

Li Jinglong lapsed into silence. Hongjun asked, anxiously, “Then… what about me?”

“I know you fear for your future,” Yuan Kun said. “Would you like to see it? Or, if you prefer, you can ask me three questions as well.”

Hongjun thought for a while. Li Jinglong looked like he had something to say, but after a moment of hesitation, he seemed to change his mind. He said to Hongjun, “Follow your heart.”

Hongjun turned back to Yuan Kun. “I want to see our future.”

“How far?” Yuan Kun asked, pacific.

“Hm… Ten years from now, maybe?” Hongjun reckoned ten years should be enough for everything to be resolved.

Yuan Kun raised a hand, and the beads whirred again. Yet just a second later, they froze in midair. “I can’t say for sure,” Yuan Kun murmured. “The future I see isn’t so far off…”

Hongjun was about to ask what he meant when Yuan Kun turned and pressed a palm to his brow.

White light exploded in his vision, bright as the first stars that shone in the night after the creation of heaven and earth. Time became a river and surged toward him. Countless images flitted past—

Hongjun was kneeling on a battlefield, holding a dying man in his arms. Yet it wasn’t Li Jinglong, but Qiu Yongsi.

He shouted in desperation as Qiu Yongsi vomited up a mouthful of blood, but he couldn’t hear his own voice. When he looked up from the sea of red surrounding him, he saw Xie Yu coiling across the sky, enveloped in obsidian fire.

The scene shifted. He saw the city of Chang'an engulfed in flames. In the wilderness beyond the walls, Yang Yuhuan rose into the sky, radiating a golden glow. Hongjun wanted to scream but could make no sound.

A divine figure haloed in pentacolor sacred light dove from the sky, magnificent tail feathers trailing behind him, and whispered something to Hongjun as a glowing giant in golden armor wielding a golden sword pursued him through the air. The true manifestation of the previous Mahamayuri arced toward the horizon, battling the armored giant in the sky.

As Hongjun looked up to follow his flight, everything vanished. A spring breeze wound past him in a sun-splashed city full of willow trees.

Hongjun found himself in a narrow alley. Peach blossoms borne on the breeze chased each other across the clear azure sky as he floated upward to view the scene from above. Basking in the warm sunlight, Hongjun suddenly felt overcome with drowsiness. Here, the heavenly and earthly meridians met and flowed into each other, and the Divine Land was washed clean of malign energies.

A boy ran into the alley. He raised the door curtains of a house and peered inside, yelling, "Daddy!"

Li Jinglong stepped outside and crouched to whisper in the boy's ear, and the boy pointed down the alley with a smile. "Mommy wants you to bring some money."

Nodding, Li Jinglong wrapped his arm around the child and kissed his cheek. Father and son chattered quietly until the child, parched, ran to fetch his cup from under the eaves. Li Jinglong called out a question Hongjun couldn't hear, his brows tightly knotted.

Hongjun watched the boy quietly throughout this interaction. A few moments later, Li Jinglong bent to pick up his son, and the two left together.

Behind Hongjun, a gust of wind blew, and willow catkins danced through the air, turning into bright stars before winking out.

"Hongjun?" Li Jinglong's gentle voice drifted into Hongjun's ear.

When Hongjun opened his eyes, he found himself lying in Li Jinglong's arms under a tree on the wide plains outside Chang'an.

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“The divine kun left,” Li Jinglong explained, looking at him with concern. “What did you see?”

Hongjun’s eyes were damp as he reached out and brushed his fingers over Li Jinglong’s cheek. “I saw the future,” Hongjun said. “A future I want.”

“Were we all alive?” Li Jinglong asked uneasily.

“Yes,” Hongjun whispered.

“Where were we?”

Hongjun shook his head. He didn’t tell Li Jinglong about the vision he’d seen, merely smiling as he said, “I don’t know.”

Li Jinglong pulled him to his feet. As they walked back to Chang’an, he held Hongjun’s hand tightly in his, as if he would never let go.

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Legend of Exorcism
VOLUME 5

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CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

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Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Legend of Exorcism is set during the Tianbao era (742–756 AD), the third regnal period of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. The Tianbao era saw the decline of the Tang dynasty, commonly regarded as the pinnacle of imperial Chinese civilization.

Many of the characters who appear in *Legend of Exorcism* are fictionalized versions of real historical figures contemporary to the setting, including Emperor Xuanzong himself, Li Longji, as well as Noble Consort Yang Yuhuan and Right Chancellor Yang Guozhong. The main members of the Department of Exorcism are fully fictional, though some of their family members are real historical figures.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

KONG HONGJUN **:** A half-yao boy from Yaojin Palace who is sent on a mission to expel the yao king of Chang’an.

LI JINGLONG **:** Formerly a commandant of the Longwu Guard, an ordinary mortal who becomes the chief of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEMONIC EXORCISM

ZHAO ZILONG : A carp yao and Hongjun's closest companion.

MERGEN : A Shiwei tribesman with the ability to transform into a gray wolf.

TIGRA YAZDEGERD á (A-TAI): A Persian prince and last surviving descendant of the House of Sasan, as well as a disciple of Persian Zoroastrianism.

QIU YONGSI : A Jiangnan scholar from West Lake sent to Chang'an to build his courage.

LU XU : A young scout from the border regions with the ability to transform into a white deer.

ASHINA ADARVAN : A-Tai's friend and loyal follower.

TURANDOKHT : A-Tai's fiancée.

YAOJIN PALACE

CHONG MING : Leader of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's adoptive father; a phoenix.

QING XIONG : One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace; a peng.

KONG XUAN : One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's birth father; a peacock.

CHANG'AN

DI RENJIE : Statesman and founder of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism (deceased).

THE DUCHESS OF GUO : Yang Yuhuan's elder sister.

EMPEROR XUANZONG (LI LONGJI): The reigning emperor of Great Tang.

FENG CHANGQING : A general of Great Tang and Li Jinglong's elder cousin.

GAO LISHI : Chief Eunuch.

HU SHENG : Captain of the Longwu Guard and Li Jinglong's former superior.

HUANG YONG : Deputy Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review.

LI HENG : The crown prince of Great Tang.

QIN WU : Li Jinglong's former subordinate in the Longwu Guard.

YANG GUOZHONG : Right Chancellor and Yang Yuhuan's cousin.

YANG YUHUAN : Beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong, also known as Noble Consort Yang.

LIANG PREFECTURE

GESHU HAN : The military governor of Hexi and Duke of Liang.

LIU FEI : The king of the fallen corpse ghosts.

OTHER

AN LUSHAN : The military governor of Hedong and Fanyang.

JIA YUZE : Hongjun’s late mother.

JIA ZHOU : Hongjun’s maternal uncle, the governor of Gua Prefecture.

LI BAI : Courtesy name Taibai. Famous poet and friend of Li Jinglong.**AN LUSHAN** : The military governor of Hedong and Fanyang.

JIA YUZE : Hongjun’s late mother.

JIA ZHOU : Hongjun’s maternal uncle, the governor of Gua Prefecture.

LI BAI : Courtesy name Taibai. Famous poet and friend of Li Jinglong.

WEN BIN : A gardener in Luoyang who fell in love with a peony.

XIANGYU : A peony yao.

XIE YU : A black jiao who escaped from the Dragon-Quelling Tower, formerly thought to be the yao king of Chang’an.

YUAN KUN : A yao known as the divine kun and a friend of Qing Xiong.

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Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

-LAO: A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.

-SHI: A suffix attached to the surname of a woman to denote her maiden name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

DIMEI: A colloquial way to refer to one's younger brother's wife.

ERGE: A word meaning "second brother."

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIUJIU: A word meaning "maternal uncle."

MEI/MEIMEI: A word meaning "little sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

SAOZI: A word meaning "elder brother's wife." It can also be used to address the wife of an unrelated male peer.

Other

SHIFU: A word for "master" or "teacher."

XIONG: A word meaning "elder brother." It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning "brother." It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

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Glossary

DRAGONS: The long (/ “dragon”), or zhenlong (/ “true dragon”), is a legendary creature that features prominently in Chinese mythology. Commonly depicted as a horned, snakelike creature with four legs, it is an auspicious symbol of the divine and historically associated with the emperor and imperial power.

According to one myth, the jiao ( ) or jiaolong (/ “flood dragon”), a variety of hornless aquatic dragon, can transform into a “true” dragon by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

According to another, a carp can transform into a dragon if it swims upstream against the current and leaps over the falls of the Yellow River at the Dragon Gate.

The five-clawed dragon is a symbol of the emperor and for his use only.

EIGHT TRIGRAMS: Also known as bagua ( ), the eight trigrams are a Daoist symbol consisting of eight symbols arranged in an octagon that surrounds the taijitu, or yin-yang symbol. It is the Daoist representation of all things in the universe.

FLYING STAR CHART: A tool some feng shui practitioners use for divination. It is a three-by-three grid, defining nine directional “palaces” demarcating the earth, and reflects the movements of nine stars in the heavens. The star positions allow a practitioner to assess the influence of yin

and yang, natural elemental energies, and the eight trigrams on patterns of qi in a location over time.

FUXI: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology. According to legend, Fuxi was first to identify the eight trigrams.

GU: A venom-based poison traditionally prepared by sealing several venomous creatures such as centipedes, snakes, and scorpions inside a closed container, where they devoured one another and allegedly concentrated their toxins into a single survivor.

JIANGSHI: The reanimated corpses of dead humans. Their limbs are locked in place due to rigor mortis, meaning they can only move directly forward, hopping with their arms outstretched in front of them.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his obligations, then he would lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and so on.

MILK NAME: In China, babies are traditionally given their (daming / literally “big name,” figuratively “given name”) one hundred days after their

birth. During those first hundred days, parents would refer to the child by their (xiaoming / “little name”) or (ruming / “milk name”). Milk names might be childish, employing a diminutive like Xiao- or doubling a syllable, but they might also be selected to ward off harm to the child. Many parents might continue referring to their child by their milk name long after they have received their given name.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with rank one being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was one path to becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

QIMEN DUNJIA: An ancient system of divination based on astronomical observations, traditionally used for strategic planning. It includes a divination chart showing eight “gates” corresponding to Growth, Harm, Repose, Retreat, Scenery, Death, Fear, and Beginnings.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun ( ) and po ( ) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls that represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms that remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but Daoism commonly features three hun and seven po.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians, similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing. The appearance of the acupuncture points can also indicate a person's health; for example, darkness of the Yintang point between the brows portends an ill fate or even death.

YAO/YAOGUAI: Living creatures and inorganic objects that have gained higher consciousness through absorbing the energy of the natural world and years of spiritual cultivation. Yao who have attained sufficiently high levels of cultivation can assume human form.

YIN AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

ZIWEI DOUSHU DIVINATION: Ziwei Doushu (/ “purple star astrology”) is a common system of astrology in Chinese culture, which predicts one’s fortune by plotting the position of certain stars at the time of one’s birth. The presence of stars in certain “palaces,” or sections of the sky, indicates either an auspicious or inauspicious destiny in different aspects of one’s life. Ziwei, also known as Polaris, the North Star, is a primary star that represents the emperor or leadership.

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About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

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Footnotes

Chapter 82: Lanling Amber

[1] Lines from the chapter “Treatise on Heaven” in the eponymous philosophical text Xunzi.

[2] A familiar form of address for one’s younger brother’s wife.

[3] Said by Gaozi in the chapter “Gaozi I” of Mengzi, an anthology attributed to the philosopher Mengzi.

Chapter 89: Frame-up

[4] A type of poison created by sealing a number of venomous creatures in a closed container and allowing them to devour each other until only one remains.

Chapter 90: Fellow Disciples

[5] The most senior-ranked male member of one’s own school in the same generation, or most senior fellow disciple under the same master.

Chapter 96: Eve of Departure

[6] Legend says that the nian beast comes out at Lunar New Year to feed on people and animals.

Chapter 99: The Divine Capital, Luoyang

[7] Opening lines from Emperor Li Longji's poem "First Visit to Qinchuan County on the Cold Food Festival."

[8] Lines from the chapter "Carefree Travels" in the eponymous philosophical text Zhuangzi.

Chapter 103: The Demon's Inner Demons

[9] Final lines from "An Invitation to Wine" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[10] A famous poet from the Tang dynasty. Du Fu's talent was never recognized in his lifetime.

[11] Tang dynasty poet and historically a good friend of Li Bai.

Chapter 107: An Explosion of Poison

[12] Opening lines from the chapter "Carefree Travels" in the eponymous philosophical text Zhuangzi.

Chapter 108: Destined by the Heavens

[13] Also known as Zhuang Zhou, a philosopher from the Warring States period and author of the eponymous text Zhuangzi.

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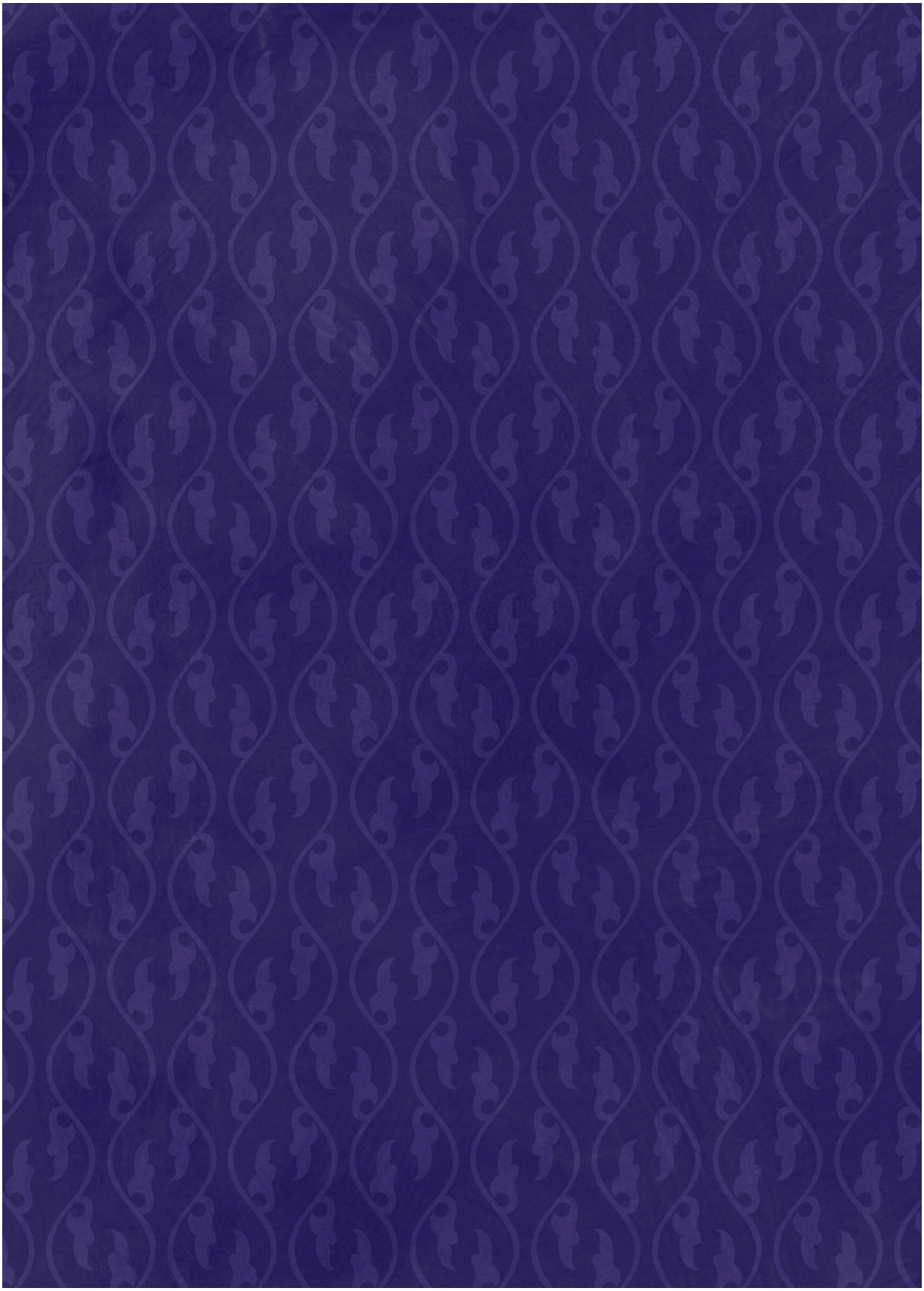

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VISIONS OF
THE PAST AND FUTURE
After returning from the north, the Department of Exorcism is no sooner reunited in Chang'an than a series of strange cases strikes the capital. Vicious ghosts have appeared in the imperial mausoleums, slaughtering the guards who protect the remains of former emperors. Whether the attacks are a true haunting, the yao king at work, or the plot of a sinister new enemy, the exorcists must discover the truth before another catastrophe befalls the nation.
Meanwhile, although Hongjun and Li Jinglong have taken a step forward in their relationship, Hongjun continues to be plagued by anxieties. One entity may be able to answer his questions: the divine kun, a powerful yao with the ability to see the future. But the kun is missing, and the yao king—or his agents—may hold the only clues to his mysterious disappearance.
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